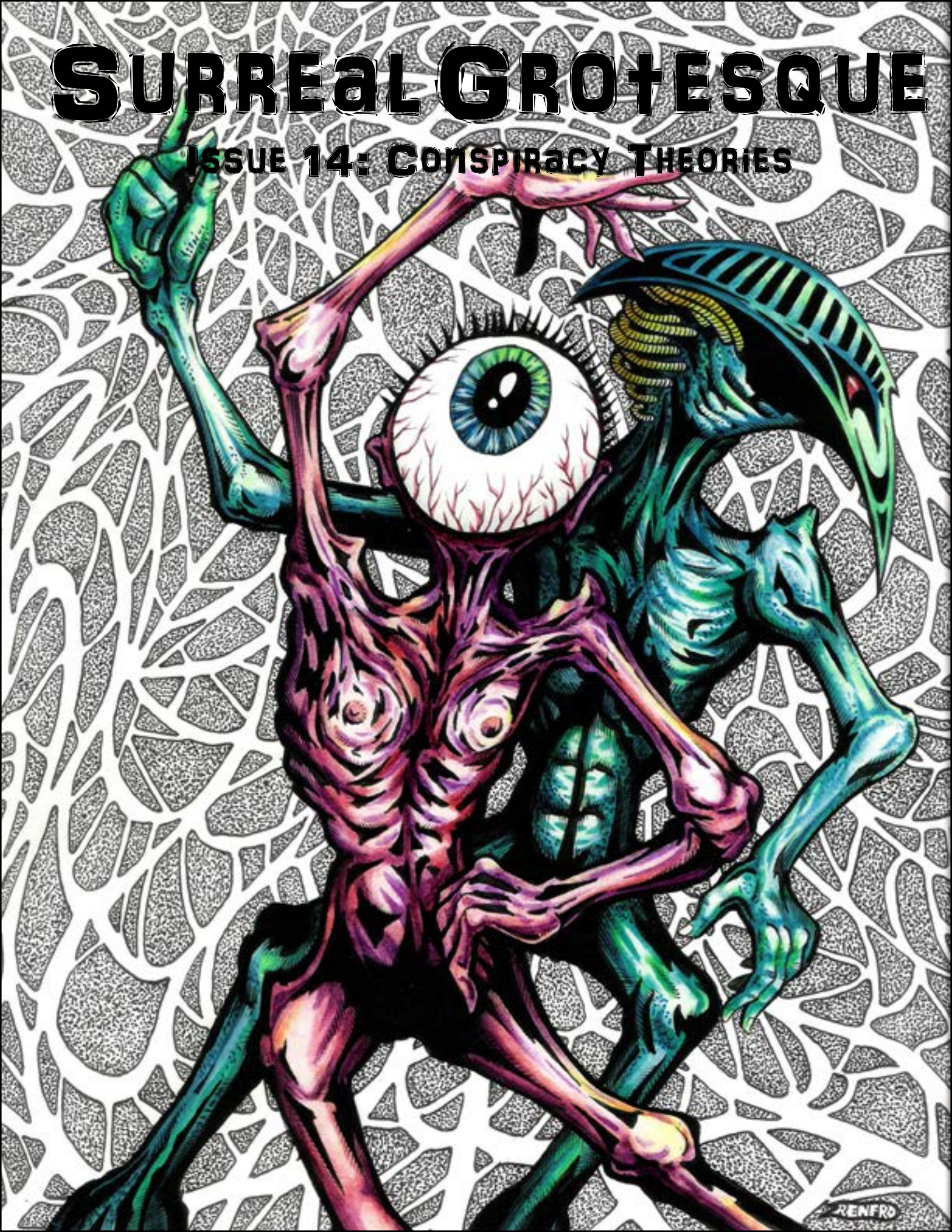


# SURREAL GROTESQUE

ISSUE 14: CONSPIRACY THEORIES





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# At Home With The Clintons

Charlie D. La Marr

Bill Clinton loved weekends in Chappaqua with Hillary. They could kick back, shapeshift into their lizard forms and make wild reptile love. Bill had to admit that while as a human, Hillary was a dumpy, aging female in pantsuits, as a lizard she was still a total babe.

He was ready for the evening. He'd gone through twelve bags of M & M's and taken out the green ones—known to contain aphrodesiacs. He reviewed all her favorite underlined scenes in 50 Shades of Grey and had the essential toys close at hand in the bedroom. And he already had a raging hard-on going with his penis and hemipenis. He could hardly wait to dance around Hillary, bite her neck and let the wild sexual ritual begin.

But, she was in the bathroom doing girl things and he was bored. So he sat down to fool around with the laptop in their bedroom. When she finally came out, smelling like Lady Gaga's "Fame" perfume, and swaying her tail seductively, Bill was sitting at the computer laughing with that familiar Arkansas chuckle.

"Okay, what did you do now?"

"Oh come on Hillary, I like to have a little fun once in a while."

"What you call, "fun" is just sick. What did you do?"

"Okay, I hacked Joe Biden's G Mail and sent messages to everyone with G Mail accounts."

"And what did it say?"

"You want me to read it to you?" he asked sheepishly.

"Yes, Bill. Read it or no mating for you tonight."

"Okay. It says. "Barack Obama is a radical Islamic extremist who plans on taking all you tree-hugging hippies for a little ride in your Priuses to lower Manhattan where his pals at the mosque across the street from Ground Zero plan on slaughtering men with their scimitars after making them watch their women get raped. Then, the streets of Lower Manhattan will run red with the blood of Wall Street fat cat infidels when they raid the Stock Exchange—which is exactly what someone named HITLER did in Nazi Germany. The signs are all

there—on the back of the dollar bill. Also hidden messages in Miley Cyrus songs. Look it up.” Pretty funny, huh?” He chuckled again.

“Not funny at all. Do you realize every time one of these conspiracy theories comes out, about twelve percent of the fucktards believe them? That isn’t going to do much to help me get votes in 2016. I’m a Democrat, too, remember? I was his Secretary of State?”

“Forget those assholes. They wouldn’t vote for you anyway. The ones who believe this stuff are way too busy teabagging each other to make it to the polling place. Don’t worry, you’ll win. It’s been arranged. Who have the Republicans got? Rand Paul? He may look like a lizard, but he ain’t one. And speaking of lizards, I spent some time surfing the conspiretard sites and found something interesting. They’re saying you and I killed fifty people while I was president.”

“Well, that’s true, Bill. There were some people out there with deep throats. They had to be taken care of. I handled the details, there was no need to bother you.”

“Well speaking of deep throats, why did we stop at fifty? Why didn’t we make it fifty-one and off that little bitch Monica? It could have saved me a lot of humiliation with that impeachment shit.”

“Because you were a bad boy and needed a little punishment. I mean, who wipes his dick on his date’s dress after a blow job? You aren’t exactly the brightest bulb in the chandelier, Bill.”

“Obviously we aren’t pumping enough mind altering gasses into the atmosphere, Hills. People shouldn’t know this shit. It’s dangerous when people know the real stuff. Next thing you know, they’re gonna find out about the Grassy Knoll. I’m gonna have to start hitting Twitter and Reddit harder with stories about Republicans. You must admit my tweets about Mitt Romney tying his dog to the roof of his car were genius.”

She shook her head. “Bill, I think you’ve been huffing too much mind altering gasses yourself. And would you please be more careful with your eyes? Why am I seeing photos of you lately with your reptile eyes showing? People notice these things, you know? And they spread nasty rumors. Twice last month, Fox News had pictures of you that were very suspicious.”

“I was at a ballgame, Hills. I had a few beers. It’s hard to remember this shit all the time. Blue eyes out, red eyes in. I try. I really do, but it’s hard.”

“People already think Democrats are gun grabbing chieftains from the New World Order who won’t rest until we have all their weapons and they’re alone in their homes with only their dicks in their hands like Michael Corleone and the Second Ammendment is nothing more than something the Obamas are using to paper train their new puppy. They’re afraid to answer the door this Halloween. They’re scared it might be some

Rothschild hired Nazi uber-liberal Middle Eastern pinko soldier of fortune there to bust in and shake them down for guns while reading from the Koran.”

Bill chuckled.

“That’s not funny, Bill. Halloween’s the second biggest holiday in America. People spend big money on costumes and candy—money that finds its way into funding the NSA! Without that money, we’ll never be able to know that those freaking hayseeds in the Bible belt talk about on the phone!”

“Well, actually the Halloween idea doesn’t sound too bad, Hills. Then maybe at Christmas, we could get them to open up to carolers. They could at least grab guns people keep near their doors. And what about Santa?”

Hillary backhanded him across the face. “It’s not enough! We need to get into their gun cabinets! We need the whole cache!”

Bill rubbed his chin. “I love it when you do that, Hills. Let’s get it on.”







Boomtown Roosky Sing This Song  
excerpted from the book  
*Hemorrhaging Slave of an Obese Eunuch*  
(Dog Horn Publishing)  
by Tom Bradley

A Hiroshima city bus, marked RADIATION EFFECTS RESEARCH FOUNDATION in both Japanese and English, worms its way in low gear, sliding up inside acid rain-ravaged bamboo groves on a dank mountain that blots the sunrise from Ground Zero every morning: a sinister peak of pre-rational alchemy plunked down, among rumors of genetic engineering run amok, at the edge of a necessarily modern metropolis.

All but one of the passengers are townies, hibakushas--those unlucky Hiroshimites who were within a kilometer of the epicenter at the wrongest possible time, and must, twice yearly, for the rest of their lives, report to the to the labs on top of this mountain, to be prodded and skewered, solely for the selfless sake of increasing mankind's store of knowledge. No healing is done up here; otherwise, the joint would lose its funding as a pure research institution.

The bus empties out near the main entrance of the Radiation Effects Research Foundation. The bomb victims file into a large corrugated aluminum structure, a Quonset hut-like affair, unrebuilt since Douglas MacArthur's GHQ tossed it up a few weeks after the brimstone chastisement of the Hiroshimites. Everybody, save one (and a very large one at that), disappears behind flapping doors marked with bold polyglot signs:

LIVER BIOPSIES

BLOOD SCREENINGS

FOETAL TISSUE SAMPLES

--VIABLE

--ABORTED

--PROBLEMATIC

STOOLS

--FORMED

--UNFORMED

URINE

The sole straggler, an outsized American named Sam Edwine, wanders bravely out back and approaches a second metal structure. It is rumored that a certain ex-Soviet witch, if not her bubbling cauldron, can usually be located here.

This dive is marked by a rectangle of gray cloth with three brownish words scrawled on it:

## RADIATION EFFECTS CAFETERIA

In order to attain the Ray Conniff-hissing entryway, Sam is forced to pick and cringe his way through a medical wasteland: a forest of grandma-headed mops planted in buckets of chlorinated rinse-water like crucifixes in jars of piss; a maze of garage door-sized sheaves of exposed X-ray film, warping and flaking in the green dew that drains, like peritonitis fluid, from the withered fronds of barren date palms.

Stooping inside, he scans the rows of pastel aluminum tables, and has little difficulty picking out his mark from among her lab-coated colleagues. She's the only one waving a bottle of cut-rate Choya plum wine in his direction.

Valentina is fleshy and, one would suppose, more-or-less voluptuous, at least according to the lights of men more emotionally developed than most far-western Americans: big protuberant breasts, wide hips and a round, pale face suffused with a shrewdness seen infrequently in Sam's corner of the world; and, true to type, the sadness, the eyes gazing off into the clouds after some lost memory of haunts less gelid.

With no preliminaries, Sam establishes his phony journalistic credentials by turning his pockets inside out and allowing his cub-reporter paraphernalia to tumble helter-skelter into space. A precious micro-cassette recorder splorts down onto a trencher of the house specialty, cold instant macaroni and cheese, which Valentina has evidently taken the liberty of ordering on the interviewer's behalf.

As he folds himself into one of those form-fitting plastic chairs found usually in bowling alleys, Sam's massive kneecaps jostle the table. Clunking noises issue from the fist-loads of opaque, jawbreaker-sized ice cubes, which are stacked like kiddy blocks inside a couple of the Mason jars that pass, here at the Radiation Effects Cafeteria, as wine glasses.

His assignment: invite himself to the foundation on the pretext of interviewing this creature for a non-existent weekly back in old Salt Lake City (assuming Russkies still consider themselves exotic enough in the free world to make the request for such an audience seem plausible).

"Just feel her out," he was told. (Not "up," mind you.) "There could be a free lunch and drinks in it."

Valentina starts feeding her face, without a word. Disdaining chopsticks, she digs her aluminum spoon out of an old Kunming batik bag and grasps it like a cement trowel. She makes no use of her presumably opposable thumb, but sticks it out straight to nudge her left nostril with each bite, as if to flaunt her proletarian credentials.

Even the more recent snapshots of her grandchildren have a yellowish, dog-eared look when she gruffly deals them out like pinochle cards across the table, not troubling to avoid the ketchup puddles.

"A budding anarchist, that one," she growls, finally breaking the silence. She thumps the face of a red-haired picturebook fairy perched on a cast-iron trike in the snow. "But very clever."

Valentina must strain her deep contralto to be heard over the chaos of the other international biophysicists' feeding--a real chore for her. She obviously prefers to speak in a profound-sounding murmur, all ears cocked toward her.

"The words 'amoebic dysentery' seem not to be in his physiological vocabulary," she observes, out of nowhere.



“Huh?” Sam says, still looking at her grandchild’s picture. “Whose...?”

“You know who I am talking about.”

Sam follows her eyes across the cafeteria. Using a Morinaga candy bar, a lab assistant who looks distressingly like Jerry Lewis tantalizes and coaxes someone into a scary-looking, chrome-bristling back room. Bawling for the sweetie is a blackened and bent native, a locally famous river hobo, dressed in frayed polyester golfing attire, several sizes too large and a few decades out of fashion. Rumor maintains this small monster was in his mother’s belly at the moment of the glamorous detonation.

Valentina says, “That particular pinhead lives on a raft in the river, and virtually subsists on raw sewage. If you’re looking for some evidence of mutation, tag a few of his leukocytes and trail them like rafts through his bloodstream.”

Her own genetic material having been scrambled during two helicopter rides over Chernobyl, Valentina was inspired, by way of saintly commiseration, to lend her gifts to this august institution. That’s the Roosky party line. But the word around the so-called “intelligence” community is that this babushka is interested less in the wretches’ irradiated chromosomes than their white blood cells. She’s supposedly been pumping them full of human immunodeficiency virus and requisitioning whole quarts of serum from their veins in the name of HIV research. One’s most extravagant paranoia might not be far off the mark. After all, the race to cure AIDS has taken on all the glamour of the race to the moon.

The pseudo-interviewer is temporarily speechless at the sheer creeping horror of this situation he’s bumbled into. But he realizes that he can do no better than to continue the investigation, as craftily as possible under the circumstances.

“Tagging leukocytes, oh yeah,” he says through a yawn, feigning boredom, inspecting a surfboard-sized thumbnail, swirling plum wine around the crusty screw-top of his Mason jar.

He obviously hasn’t a clue how to go about this subtle sort of interrogation. He’s got no idea how to ask leading questions and make insinuations that will bring this chunky Bolshevik out into the pitiless light of incriminating self-revelation. Back home on the sun-raped Salt Flats, subtlety was considered an effete, rarefied art, like harpsichord playing or versifying. Sam and his cousins never needed to be subtle when swatting brine flies off their elongated shins. So today he must fake it.

“You know something?” she bellows around a mouthful of macaroni, while staring straight at two Swiss geneticists who are having a dispute over the last saucer of brownish banana jello. “When I was next door in China during the seven good years, the workers would usher their thinner comrades to the front of the lunch line, saying, ‘Here, Comrade So-and-So, this month there is a shortage of oil for our fried noodles, and you have the most ribs of anybody among us. You go first.’”

“I’ll have to take your word for that. I wasn’t around, as you can probably tell.”

“Oh, that’s right. The Maoists also had a shortage of Americans in those days.”

“What I meant,” says Sam, offended, “was that I was in diapers. Rolling around in the dew on my mother’s Kentucky bluegrass. Pulling adorable faces for the Brownie.”

“Kentucky? But I was told you would be from the Rocky Mountains.”

"Never mind. As a mere non-taxpaying American expatriate, I have no access to the agencies that could tell me what republic you're from. So we're even." First explicit lie of the day.

"Anyway, it does not matter. Look at us..." She grabs Sam's arm and twists it, so the soft, sunless underside is visible. Then she holds out her own equally flounder-pale forelimb for comparison. "See? Identical shades. We are the same. Onaji-da, as the natives so primitively put it. Even our leaders are clones. Ignorant clones both of them, handsome performers with red ball noses, like in the circus. Just clones."

"Clowns or clones?"

"Exactly."

Again, Sam is temporarily at a loss for words. For the lack of anything better to do, he swigs down his wine, pours more and inhales that, even though the taste is turning his tongue and teeth inside-out.

Valentina refills both of their jars, and is about to offer a toast to clones and/or clowns, when something, or someone, looming up behind Sam catches her short.

"Oh, God," she murmurs. She grabs up a few of Sam's cheese-gloppy papers and tries to hide her face. "Extreme unpleasantness approaching," she whispers to her table-mate. "Hide me, Samsha."

Sam turns and sees Jerry Lewis, again. No question, it is him. And not the current grave, wise Jerry Lewis, but the 1950s one: the crewcut, the cross-eyes, the overbite, the muscular-distrophied knock-knees, and the smelly-socked feet that trip over any object in their path. Lugging a huge pyrex beaker brimming with something viscous as the wine, it's Jerry Lewis, right down to the idiot yell -

"Ooo-wow! Look, Dr Val! We got it down! Ooo-wow-wow! It's ninety-nine and forty-seven one-hundredths per cent pure!"

Of course, the nutty guy slips on a discarded surgical glove about ten feet away and falls flat on his face, smashing the beaker and splashing gray syrup all over the arms, faces and hair of a dozen lab-coated diners.

"Oops, sorry," he simpers, gathering himself up sheepishly. "Uh, maybe you fellas better drop by de-contam later on and take a shower or so. That's concentrated..."

"Silence!" screams Valentina. Unbelievably quick on her overburdened feet, she leaps up and pitches her research assistant out the door like a snowball. She weaves a wide circle around her puzzled, gagging colleagues, and returns to the interview, muttering unhappily under her breath in Muscovite gutter lingo, "God-damned zipperheads. Who is needing them?"

This does not bode well. Christ knows what these polar totalitarians are capable of. Sam got a miserable C-minus in high school biology. With only a little prodding he can be persuaded to imagine Hiroshimites diced to a gray froth and smeared between the jagged panes of this Muscovite's microscope slide.

Settling back down to her lunch, Valentina resumes her commentary, as if nothing untoward has taken place. "Yes, now is indeed a time for clones. You and I, Samsha, we can be big blue-eyed clones, too. We must mount a performance. We have a responsibility to let the readers of your hometown weekly gazette know that the cold war is really over, so they can get back to their births/ defecations/ deaths in a peaceful frame of mind. And we have an equally weighty responsibility to notify our imperious Nipponjin hosts that they are now redundant. A Pacific buffer between our two great Caucasoid civilizations is no longer necessary. These island dwarves are



on their inevitable way down. Their pitiful spit-bubble has burst. Soon you and I will be riding rickshaws to work, Samsha, and paying the fare with half-smoked cigarette stubs. The natives will dive and scramble to suck the simple carbohydrates from our discarded chewing gum wrappers.

“So, please, come.” She pauses, belches, hammers back her fourth jar with grace worthy of a Bolshoi ballerina, and continues. “This is not Ukrainian spiritus in our glasses. Far from it. But, no matter. Friendship is the only intoxicant we need. Together, let us now sing the Internationale.”

“Um, I never really learned that one.”

“Never really learned that one?” She heaves the saddest sigh of all history. “What are you doing here on Honshu besides wasting my time? Ignorant American cowboy, if they were going to insist on sending you to Asia, your party cell should have kept you strapped in the plane until it reached Mongolia, where you’d be at home with the horses. And I am saying this with an affection that wells up from my depths, Samsha.”

“I know Chinese who were internally exiled there during the Ten Years’ Chaos, and they had the time of their lives.”

“Internally exiled? Where? My depths?”

“Mongolia.”

“Yes, yes. I know the tale already. They learned how to ride the very mares whose milk they got chubby on, correct? Well, here is our mare’s milk, Samsha. Let us get chubby on it. And meanwhile we will sing something else, just as good, in duple time.”

She licks her spoon clean, puts it away, and slings her Kunming bag over her shoulder. Unflinchingly, she gropes into the coagulated mass of macaroni and cheese on Sam’s trencher to switch on Mamoon’s micro-cassette recorder. Then she takes both of Sam’s forearms in her hands and looks deep into his eyes.

“Please tell me you’re not too immature to have heard of Pyotr Seeger. And his smash hit--”

But Sam is way ahead of her. He calls the key, and they stand up. They toast each other again in sugary Choya wine, link arms, and croon across the strange-smelling cafeteria, Valentina conducting with fingers that fling strings of cheese in wide arcs over and around their heads.

May there always be sunshine,  
May there always be blue skies,  
May there always be mommy,  
May there always be me!

Together their rib cages swell. In unison, they suck in several dozen Nipponjins’ worth of moldy Boomtown air, then exhale it, with twin facial expressions of something resembling disdain.

When the inevitable climax of physical contact does come, it’s in the form of a hearty back slap: her fist explodes between this full-sized gentleman’s shoulderblades like a tactical nuclear device in far-western Xinjiang. Sam only manages to stay on his feet because their elbows are intertwined, and Valentina is strong as a water buffalo. They remain coupled, their bodies swaying with fruity alcohol.

“Yes, we are indeed two of a kind, my Samsha. Both heartlessly betrayed by our own cultures. But here we

are, like your famous Lemuel Gulliver in Lilliput, more or less productively stranded among our inferiors. I understand why I can't get a job in my country: chaotic as it is at the moment, it's hard enough to procure turnips, much less tenure. But what is your problem? What could have possessed you, my full-sized friend, at the start of such a premature decline into middle age--" She pats his gut and strokes his pate. "--to leave the golden land of football stadium-sized supermarkets, which Yeltsin has so heartily recommended to my people, and to come to this stunted, withered islet, with its fleshless citizenry, whose ribs you can catalog a city block away? You cannot tell me that all Doctors of Creative Novelization in Kentucky must leave their homes to eke out a livelihood among the yellow people."

Sam begins to wince as the subject of his unemployability in the real world is broached: the one aspect of his existence that turns him livid.

Valentina, of course, doesn't notice. She presses on, and even begins to wax rhapsodic. "I thought America was supposed to be the land of gushing milk and spewing honey, the proverbial horn of plenty, embarrassing plenty, humiliating plenty, oozing from the very skin pores of the lumpenproletariat..."

As she goes on and on, it becomes apparent that she is a slightly sloppy, oral-type drunk. Off-white triangles of suds are whipped up in the lipsticky corners of her mouth. But the overall effect of her enormous buttery presence is not so much disgusting as too rich, in the culinary sense, like certain continental steak sauces.

"Samsha, be frank with me, your fellow Caucasoid. Are all your Ph.D. classmates languishing here on the wrong side of the International Date Line? What about the women? The Hispanics? The Negroes? What about the quadriplegics and the mainstreamed mongoloids? What about the oppressed practitioners of alternative lifestyles, such as members of the gay community and pedophiles? And what about you? Don't you crave the company of other creative novelizers? Don't you miss your friends, your family, your culture?"

Sam glances around at the other diners, who, perhaps, are staring and snickering at him. "My culture?" he says. "There are whole platoons of Mormon missionaries in this town. They congregate at our place on Saturdays to watch Little House on the Prairie reruns on the bilingual TV. They force us to look at pictures of their big soft moms back in Provo. My culture? I get more than enough of my culture once a week. I fucking gag on it."

"But everyone knows that you Americans do not expatriate well. You become precious and catty and insufferable. I have this on good authority. It is written by your own Mr Hem--"

The raw spot has been rubbed too hard. It wasn't in search of himself that he climbed the mountain and consulted this boozy sibyl.

"Fuck him!" screams Sam. "All the way up his tight asshole! Who's interviewing who, anyway? Jism Crust hung on the crotch!"

Of course, he is immediately chagrined at his own appalling, and slightly weird, outburst; so he starts to grovel out an apology. But, when he looks up from his sheepish shrug, he sees that Valentina's whole head, indeed, her whole upper body--not only the face, but the neck, the foot-long cleavage, the flour-sack arms, even the vast fingernails--are flushed a phosphorescent red. She is delighted by his toilet mouth.

"Now, my Samsha," she hisses huskily, pupils steaming, "yes, now you are beginning to behave like the full-sized gentleman you truly are! Come, let us visit my personal space. I will show you secret things--ah, look! As if on cue, one of my, so to speak, patients is arriving."

An aging day laborer is just peeking into the cafeteria, his cretinous elder sister drooling and vocalizing at his



trembling elbow. Her hoots echo over the snakish sounds of Ray Conniff's golden-oldy, "Red Roses for a Blue Lady," which slithers from the Muzak.

"Let me dispose of that miserable creature, and then--ah!--we have so many things to discuss, Samsha!"

Sam's eyes are not focusing properly--grains of fructose seem to be abrading the insides of his lids--but he could swear that he sees squares of white gauze draped and patched across the woman's infant-sized face and neck. They signify, to his inflamed imagination at any rate, unrestrained tissue sampling.

He thinks he hears Valentina belch again behind his back and sigh, "Back to work. Come, Samsha, you can assist." He feels her hand on his shoulder.

bio: Tom Bradley has published twenty-five volumes of fiction, essays, screenplays and poetry. His recent ventures with visual artists include Family Romance (Jaded Ibis), Felicia's Nose (MadHat), We'll See Who Seduces Whom: a graphic ekphrasis in verse (Unlikely Books) and Elmer Crowley: a katabasic nekyia (Mandrake of Oxford). Further curiosity can be indulged at [tombradley.org](http://tombradley.org).







# **REPTILIAN SHAPESHIFTERS FROM THE CENTRE OF THE GALAXY BY DANI BROWN**

On a dark night way deep down on the southernmost tip of England a car is pulled over. Oddly, the same thing is happening at the same exact moment in Texas (albeit in daylight). And Argentina. And in Bangladesh. And any other country you can name and some you didn't even realise existed. But we're concerned with what was happening in England because it is the same story everywhere all over the world (although in Amish country it was buggies instead of cars that were pulled over and in Israel the mistake was made of pulling over two kids doing their national service). Two old people – a husband and wife, swore under their breath. They didn't have time to be dealing with the police but luckily for them they made their deliveries from their illegal farm yesterday and the car was clean (although there was still the underlying sour perfume of hemp, AKA marijuana). They pulled over and waited patiently. With all the speed cameras everywhere they didn't even think the police pulled people over anymore. Maybe their farm had been raided – the wife swallowed down her anxiety, wishing she was swallowing it down with a nice mild joint. A young officer stepped up to the window and the husband rolled it down.

“Step out of the car,” she told both of them.

The husband and wife looked at each other. This didn't seem to be a routine traffic stop. Millions of other people across the globe stepped out of their vehicles at that very same moment. Not just drivers, but passengers too, including children and pets. Footsteps behind them indicated another police officer. The wife had a leaky bladder, luckily she remembered to put on her incontinence pants but those felt soaked through. She shouldn't have let her husband talk her into buying the discount ones. They did nothing to suck moisture away from her body. A car turned around the bend shining light on the situation. Something didn't seem right but neither husband or wife could work out what it was before the car disappeared. They were plunged into near darkness once again. Everything was quiet. A bit too quiet. English country lanes, even at night should be filled with life. There should be rats and hedgehogs in the hedges making the scurrying noises. But there wasn't. The air was still. That car that so recently passed felt like that last sign of life they would ever see (or hear). The only sound was the snap of vinyl gloves. This served to make the wife even more nervous with more urine in her cut price incontinence pants. Then the sound of approaching footsteps. The air seemed heavier than a second previous. Both husband and wife felt like they couldn't move (they probably couldn't). A second officer approached them saying nothing. The wife could feel her insides turn to liquid. She very well might shit herself. The husband was in the same situation but without the luxury of an adult diaper (as were many people worldwide – including a young Canadian couple on their first date – how embarrassing). Another second passed and the air seemed to have doubled in density. The footsteps of the two officers and the rubbing of their trousers were the only

sounds that could be heard. One officer was walking towards the wife and the other towards her husband. Both were wearing blue vinyl gloves that seemed to glow in the light of the cop car's headlights. Or maybe it wasn't the headlights. Maybe both cops were glowing that night. Maybe all the cops in the world were glowing that particular night. The husband felt warm sticky breath on the back of his neck – less than a second later the wife did too.

“Put your hands on the roof of the car,” the woman officer said.

“We're going to search you now,” the male officer added.

The wife swallowed; she didn't like the sound of that. It was hardly like they were going to hide their reefer up their arses, like the youngsters sometimes did. The husband was happy he had shit his pants. All over the world people were either dreadfully happy or dreadfully embarrassed about the state of their pants, except in Israel. Our two Israeli kids on national service knew something wasn't right and also had much better control over their bowels than anyone else who had been pulled over. They weren't going to allow these two officers – one male and one female, to do such things to them. They pointed their army issued Uzis at the police.

“No, we're going to search you.”

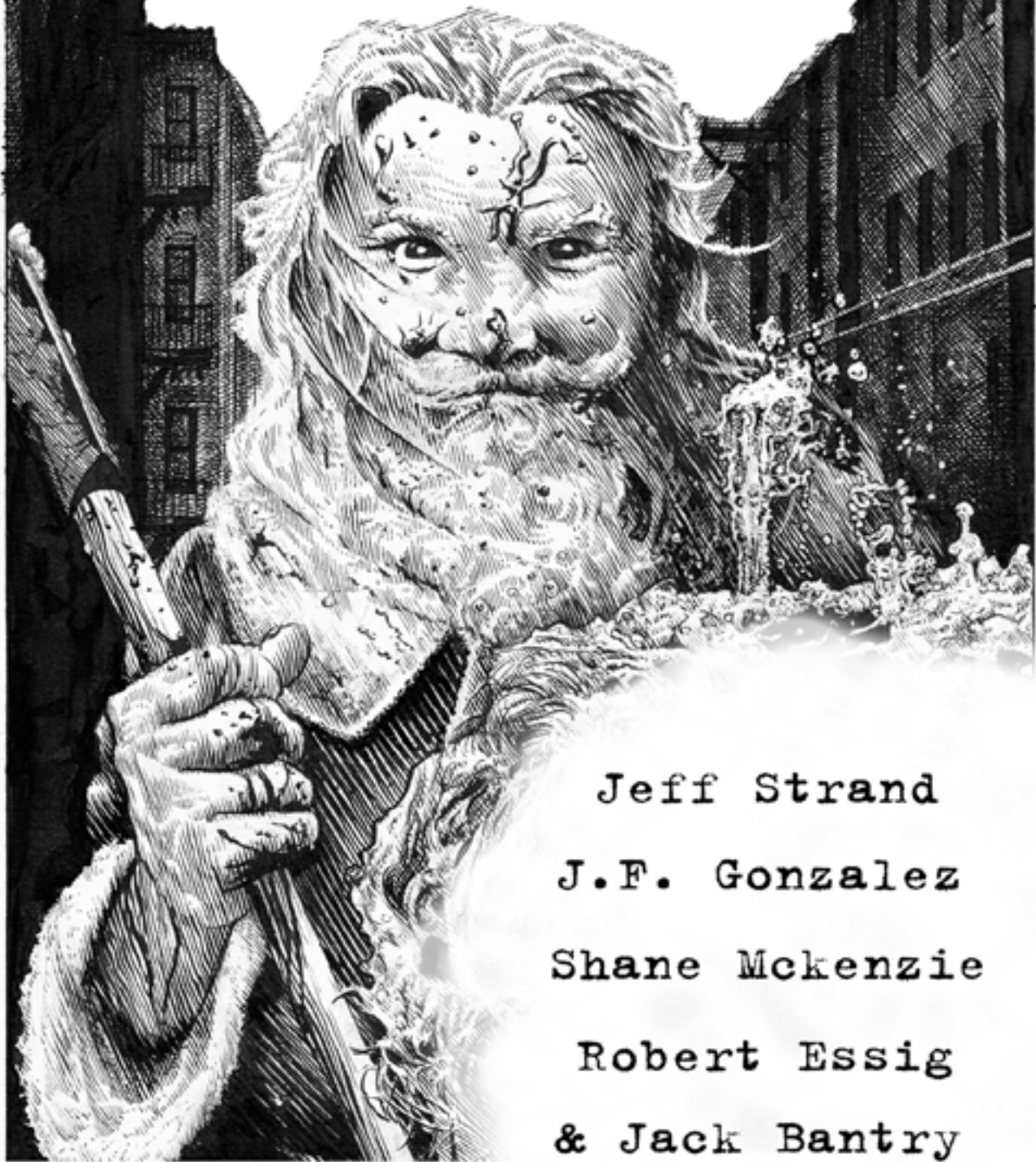
The police didn't look too concerned, just like their counter parts all over the world. But these two in Israel were in for a little shock. Well if they had time to feel shock they would have been. But back to our elderly reefer-growing, reefer-smoking couple in South West England both of whom had shit themselves, only one was wearing discount brand incontinence pants. The wife's mouth went dry (not the pleasant cotton mouth feeling associated with getting high), the husband simply wanted to spit – preferable to do it into the mouth of the lady officer behind him. Something didn't seem right – they hadn't even looked in the car and already they were proceeding to search them at the roadside. The wife felt a cool gloved hand run along her trouser line. Then it sunk lower. She didn't like it but felt some satisfaction at the fact that if he went much lower he would be greeted by a warm and gooey brown surprise.



ZINE OF THE MONTH TO CHECK OUT!

Coming 1st December 2013

# SPLATTERPUNK<sup>4</sup>



Jeff Strand

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## **Open Lines by Jeremy Maddux-a Review by Courtney Alsop**

Cliff has one of those inflated egos that demand that he be the center of attention, which makes him a formidable radio host. This short story is about the happenings of his last night on the air as the Witch Doctor, and he is taking calls to talk about anything in the realm of the paranormal. Along for the ride are the members of his crew and his occasional sexual fling, Joan.

Cliff has a larger-than-life personality, and he plans to go out with a bang, but what strikes me is that he is a genuine character. He goes about his good-intentions in a dramatic fashion, such as threatening to stop his show unless his entire crew received a raise. It is a short story, so there is much left to ponder about by the end because we don't have much time with the characters.

What I enjoyed most about this story are all the paranormal occurrences that are phoned in-a skinwalker, a man who has lost his shadow, and Cliff's dead father. I love the overall mystery-are any of these people telling the truth?

Personally, I don't know anything about radio shows, and the author immerses the reader into the world of late-night radio production without making

the reader feel lost or stupid.

The writing is phenomenal. It consists of engaging dialogue, a clean delivery, and a fast-pace. Giving it a genre is difficult, but I'd go with drama, mystery, and bizarro. Overall, it is funny, subversive, and smooth. The mysteries and the ending make you question yourself, as Cliff questions his existence and future. I highly recommend this short read this to people who want an experience that is out-of-the-ordinary.



## **The Last of Us-A Review by Courtney Alsop**

Just when I was bored of zombies, The Last of Us came along and reinvigorated my enthusiasm for new games in the survival horror genre and zombie apocalypses. The last year has brought us a slew of lackluster zombie videogames with blockbuster budgets. Frankly, I've had given up. Then I tried The Last of Us.

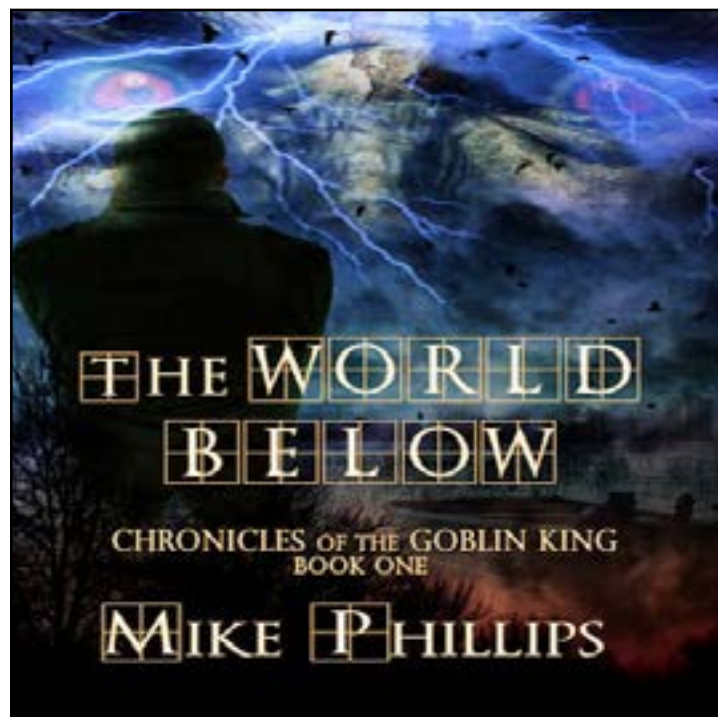
Set 20 years after a viral outbreak created the zombie-like Infected, the United States operates under a military-enforced system of quarantine. The tyranny has brought out the anti-government rebel faction named the Fireflies. Caught in all of this are the regular civilians like Joel, who do whatever they can to survive, which is mostly smuggling. After a few deals gone wrong, Joel and his partner Tess

agree to take on some unusual cargo. The cargo is a 14-year-old girl name Ellie. Ellie's secret may be the key to finding a cure, but only if they can avoid the military and get her to a group of Fireflies.

Who is the villain in this story? The government, the Fireflies, the bandits, the Infected? The cold truth is that this game is not about solving the world's problems. It is about two characters trying to survive in a dangerous world that is beset with problems that are too big for the two of them to handle. The hope is that Ellie has what the Fireflies need to make the cure, and your job is to take her there.

It does have a firm grounding in the action adventure genre, but you usually have a choice between running in with your guns blazing or taking a stealth route. Unlike games such as Silent Hill, a lot of the gameplay in The Last of Us takes place during the day. It makes the experience commonplace and familiar, creating a scenario that is more plausible than ending up in Silent Hill's Otherworld. Is it terrifying? Not really, especially since zombies have gone the way of vampires (oversaturated and underwhelming).

There is nothing significant for me to complain about. The story is heart-wrenching with powerful themes such as self-sacrifice, family, and fate. Ellie has some hilarious moments, and she is often curious about the world that ended before she was born. Her moxie combined with Joel's grizzled demeanor create some amusing and touching moments. While a game's graphics is not a make-or-break aspect for me, I was impressed by the visuals. The main characters' models are realistic, and the environments are gritty, yet vivid. If you're not bored of zombies, give the fungi epidemic a try.



## ***The World Below* by Mike Phillips-a Review by Courtney Alsop**

After a terrible industrial accident leaves Mitch scarred, he moves to a new town to start again. Life is looking up until the mysterious and beautiful Elizabeth gives him a bracelet. Little does he know, she is a Faerie who has stolen the Blade of Caro from Baron Finkbeiner, ruler of the *World Below*. To retrieve the only weapon that can kill him, he Baron sends Hume, a man with his own powers, to kidnap her. With his girlfriend abducted, Mitch becomes an unlikely hero on a quest to save the *World Below*.

This urban fantasy is an interesting mix between the world that we know and the world that is physically under us, populated by magical creatures. The *World Above* and the *World Below* have a gritty quality that I quite enjoyed, and set the need for a hero. The story jumps between a fantasy world and the contemporary and familiar – from the Goblin King and the Hume to Mitch. The recognizable world that Mitch inhabits for most of the story is filled with small-talk and some subtle union bashing. The fantasy-based portion of the novel is where the excitement is, and Mitch gets involved with it at about page 88. It takes a long time to get there, but the author had to set up how Mitch became involved in all of this magic business for the story to make



sense.

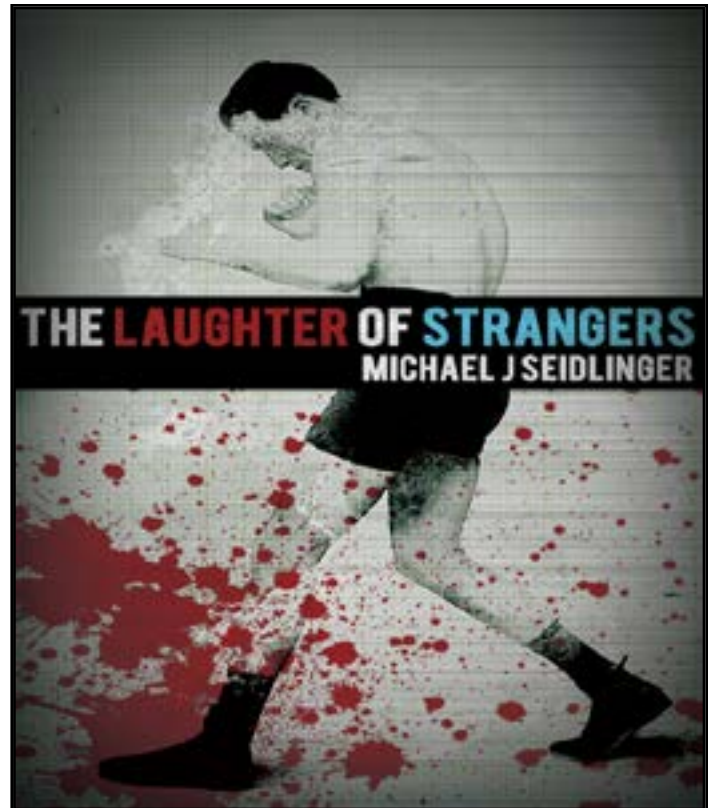
The main characters are likeable and memorable. Mitch is a genuine good guy, probably the closest thing we get to an *everyday hero*. He was disfigured, and now he is fighting with the union and his old employers to pay for the surgeries to correct it. Yet he keeps on trying, even when he can't find a job and his old friends have mostly deserted him. I was honestly rooting for him to find happiness. He finds that in Elizabeth, another character that I enjoyed. When she's with Mitch, she's sweet and funny, and she can hold her own when in danger. Between the two main characters, you can cheer for them without guilt for their less-than-amiable traits.

Unfortunately, the secondary characters did not interest me a great deal. The humans were the vessel that brought Mitch to Elizabeth, and the goblins brought Mitch to the Baron. At least the goblins had some giggle-worthy dialogue, such as "*Your breath smells like mint and your hair like strawberries,*" (page 91).

This is not a fast-paced read, but it is engaging. The beginning of the book might turn away readers, as switching between the (depressing) life of Mitch and Hume with the Goblin King is jarring. As you are reading, it's impossible to guess how these storylines will be linked, but they are eventually. There are also many grammatical errors. One or two I can ignore, but there are many obvious mistakes that cowwuld have been rectified during the proofreading phase.

The fantasy world could use some more building. I don't get a sense about the whole *World Below* as it exists. We see pieces, and that's it. We aren't given a history, just information about how it is now. I'd like to see more world building here, as this *is* a fantasy and it is populated by imaginative creatures, ugly and beautiful. Thankfully, a sequel can easily show more of this universe to the reader.

The writing and the world is accessible to both teens and adults, and I highly recommend this book to those looking for something different. I have never read a book involved with quirky goblins before, and it is a refreshing change from vampires and werewolves.



## The Laughter of Strangers: Review by Jeremy Maddux

So, the first hundred pages or so are *\*almost\** a traditional narrative, where "Sugar" Willem Floures and his trainer, Spencer, struggle with the aging fighter archetype, the stark realization that time is running out for their livelihood and, in response, cook up a publicity stunt where Willem admits to murdering someone in a blackout induced rage. Only it didn't really happen, hence the term 'publicity stunt'.

The book had me on this hook alone. Then, it deviated into an identity crisis, or at least I thought it deviated as Floures did battle inside his mind with one version of himself after another. Indeed, I felt something was lost initially with this slide into existential white noise, until the gravity of these words truly sunk in: "You can be whatever you want to be. You can change whatever you want to change."

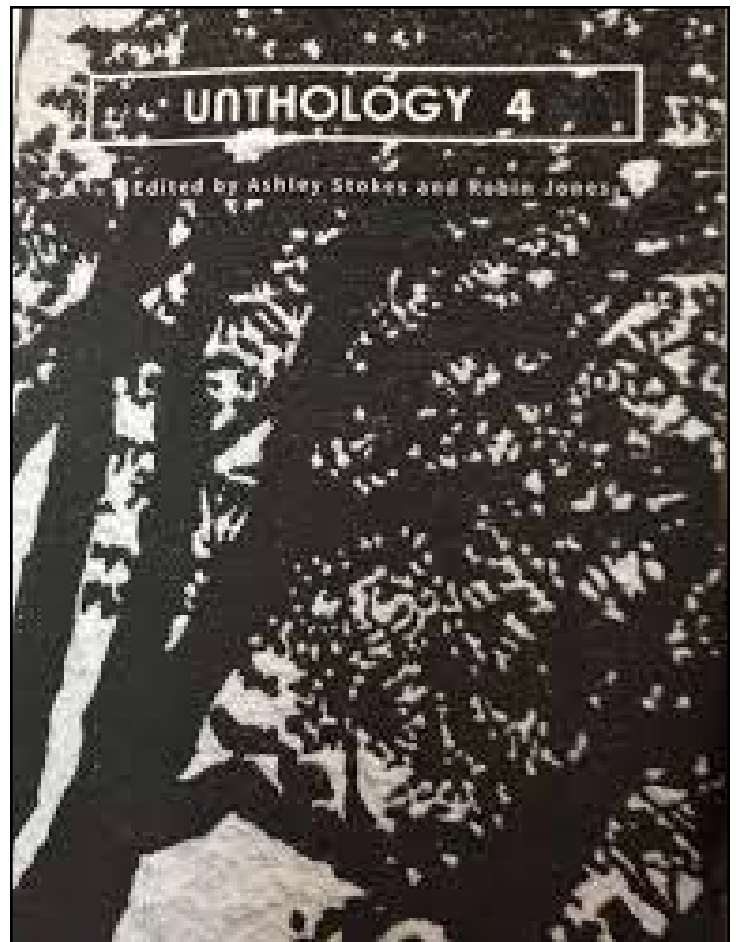
"Sugar" Willem Floures is a guy you feel sorry for, not in the same way that one roots for the underdog Rocky Balboa. Where Rocky was a never was, Willem is a guy who was on top for several decades, smashing every contender and tomato can (boxing



slang) thrown his way. He had his time, and he's having trouble letting go.

Also watch for the dollhouse metaphor in the final chapter, because media-centric celebrities are nothing if not our own dolls. We dress them up, conjure imaginary scenarios for them, display their likenesses throughout our homes. They're exactly like dolls.

Cameron Pierce was right to call this the weirdest boxing novel ever written. However, Michael Seidlinger managed to siphon some genuine soul from himself into this work, and he should be commended for it.



#### Unthology 4: Review by Daniel W. Gonzales

Unthology is a British Anthology Series featuring stories by an eclectic group of writers all of whom explore themes ranging from religion to existential ennui and relationships. The stories are more literary and introspective and less on the freakish scale that readers of Surreal Grotesque may be used to but definitely worth checking out if you want to read something different and unique. Some of the more memorable stories include "A Real T.O.A." about a young couple on holiday who slowly begin to realize that their relationship is over. While "Violet" by Barnaby Walsh about a man who pretends to be into church literature to impress a librarian. All the stories seem to carry a theme of people pretending to be something they are not or putting on airs in order to get through a fairly mediocre existence. It's about how we all go through periods in our life where we doubt everything, wonder what got us to the point in our lives where we are at and where we go from there in order to have a happy existence.



# A HISTORY OF LOVE

BY VINCENZO BILOF

We might be in the ruins of Troy, watching seagulls float languidly over the broken walls where the bloodstains of fools and innocents compose the ruins. If you place a seashell next to your ear you can hear the ocean; if you put your ear up against the stone you can hear the cries of children while slaughter commences.

This is where we have come to die.

The ghettos of Atlanta or Philadelphia, the town square of Madrid during the Inquisition, the streets of Versailles during the Reign of Terror. Berlin or Nuremberg, Rome or California. We have been there and we have been here. A dark alleyway in a place we can no longer name. Maybe the murdered American tribes called it by several names, but in this darkness there is only the flaming barrel where wintry men with snot crusted into their beards dream of warmth or death.

My Zeus and my Roland, Constantine and Napoleon. He has touched history, and I want to feel the words of dead men flood my ears with the lamentations that only legends can sing. Together we have escaped the oasis where we have slept in white rooms; we have eaten apple sauce from plastic spoons and have felt the wrath of electrodes pressed against our temples. We are the inheritors of cognitive theories given to us by men who smoked from pipes with one hand buried in the pocket of a silk robe.

He approached silently, his long, wavy hair and well-trimmed beard marking him as a man worthy of mead halls or crucifixes. He released my hand, and my thin fingers felt bare without his touch. His robe trailed behind him while the ceremonial knife, procured from the kitchens of our mutual prison, caught the firelight along its serrated edge.

I held my breath. Years have passed while languishing in restraints, married men dripping sweat into my eyes, the phosphorescent hum of light a sordid soundtrack for the moments in which thought perished. This is what it would feel like to watch my son graduate from high school, or marry a beautiful man or woman or beast, or receive the Nobel Peace Prize, if such a thing existed.

All my life, I'd been waiting for this moment.

A dancer among still men, background throats which open to let the red waterfall flow. Three men who had waited for this man their entire lives, each tortured moment of despair culminating in this pain. One of them slumped over the barrel, bleeding into the fire, flames licking at his forehead. The others clutched at the life which oozed between their fingers, their legs kicking, their bowels purging beloved poisons.

My breath seized while my knees trembled. He stood over them, a saint deified by the blade. He kept his promise to me. My love for him is undying, our conjoined light the fading strength of stars exploding in darkness, the reality of their demise extended through light years. I want to run my fingers through his hair while he bleeds from every pore of his flesh over my own naked skin, another promise he whispers into my ears while my consciousness drifts through dreams and phosphorescence.

My fingers traced the edged wrinkles around my lips and I sat upon the concrete amidst the overflowing garbage and the scurrying rats.

I am the enraptured audience.

A faint smile lingered over his lips, a presence phantasmal, lashes that fall in slow motion over flame-reddened cheeks. Moisture in his eyes captured the orange glow of the fiery barrel; HYPER

SLEEP sprayed upon the wall in the artistic glory of men who assassinated the brick, concrete, and steel of a decaying metropolis, an epitaph for the vainglorious tomb.

My lover crouched over a dying man and tilted his head with an affectionate, soft expression, the cherubic rendition of ignorant massacre in the name of a revolution. His fingertips rove around the top of the man's bald head, tracing the incision line. He methodically carved through scalp, peeling the skin away. The victim's mouth was open and the choking intensified. His legs twitched violently.

My lover stood and stomped upon the man's skull to soften bone.

My alchemical prophets once said that I burned my own house down. They said that I had amnesia, but I can remember sailing across vast oceans with my chin held high, a long hero with smoky eyes and a hairy chest paddling us to an undiscovered shore. I stood upon that shore while I watched men die.

The brain shone in the flame while gore dripped from my lover's large hands. A helicopter thundered overhead in the night sky, searching for something that could not be understood no matter how many needles were plunged into veins.

He rubbed the brain over his face.

"I can see the infinite coursing through the wires," he explained. "Data stored by the untranslated hieroglyphics of the gods. Our engineers left the blueprint for war and peace, love and pain, here."

He turned to the wall behind him and traced dead vocabulary into the mortar built first by Gilgamesh's hands, or the nightmares of Osiris, the madness of Caligula, the holiness of Charlemagne.

Someone once said that I left my graduate students sitting at their desks. I walked into the security room and imagined Triumphal arches and the bones of Spartacus. I saw futures like stairways moving upward and backward. I was in an Escher prison where white men in chainmail sat on the stairs and wept, or stared at nothing. Someone once told me I screamed while writing essays on the glory of war and the history of the future. My password to everything was ORACLE.

Ares laughed and gestured for me to stand beside him. His appearance changed. Perfectly-combed blond hair was swept to one side of his head; his blue eyes were the rare sapphires that men killed themselves to mine for their corporate-colonial-slave master-lords.

"Love me like you want to," he said and put the remnants of the brain that hadn't been scraped against the wall into his mouth.

I leaned in and bit into the other side of the morsel; I closed my eyes and envisioned gutshot Confederates crying for their mothers on a smoky hill, their bones destined to be interred at Gettysburg. I watched Robert Lee and Ulysses S. Grant sit on a riverbank beside each other and wash blood from their hands.

Cranberry juice and syrup. Semen and blood. The taste of human history in my mouth.

A helicopter swept through phases of darkness above us

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Someone once said I walked out of class one day. A concept was being compared to the Vietnam War (the official police action enterprise). "I am not a crook," I might've said before leaving. Before the door closed behind me, someone asked if they were still going to get their study guide for the exam.

My son the priest believed he consumed the flesh of Christ. A trick I once taught him while showing him worlds full of sand and pyramids built by aliens or a superior intellect.

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My lover looked like George Orwell. A moustache I recognized. The blade opened a stomach



and he playfully splashed me with blood. We giggled while we dug around in the exposed stomachs and grabbed organs in our gory hands. I threw a liver at him, which struck him in the chest, slid down the length of his body, and plopped onto the cement.

Now, he reminded me of Andrew Jackson, with a flowing mane of gray hair behind his head, a head frozen on the twenty dollar bill. I know he was listening for the tears of the starving as they marched across the country toward an alien paradise, a prison built by tragedy.

I watched him dig the entrails out of a corpse. He wrapped them around my shoulders and told me how pretty I was.

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My son, my lover, had gone insane. We learned these tricks together at breakfast when he was just a boy.

He drank sacramental wine and declared it blood, while I thought it better to give him actual blood to bless. He would have none of it. I thought the blood of a virgin would be suitable. How could it not be holy? He knew that Mary was a virgin, but he protested. A tiny little blond girl bled out into a glass. Someone's milk carton-morning musings. Crunching Cheerios while staring at the face of a name that had become history. I loved my son and wanted to make him happy. I had to tie him down and spoon the blood into his throat. It's just tomato soup, honey.

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"Behold the journey to the moon," my beloved man announced while he dropped an appendix into the burning barrel.

I danced for him around the barrel, swinging the entrails around me, sashaying and wiggling my hips.

Someone once told me I left my students and walked into the security room. They said I carved out a man's eyeballs with a pen and duct-taped them to my own eyes so I could see through them. I wanted to make a metaphorical statement about time. That's what an alchemist said.

The helicopter was closer.

I wanted my lover more than ever. Augustus the almighty conqueror, formerly named Octavian. The Caesar of my bleeding heart. Black hair reaching for his eyebrows. A stoic face, the statuesque manner of a demigod.

He lifted a corpse above his head and slipped himself inside the ribcage. He wore the man like a hat, twirling while his shoulders and neck bore the dead weight. Blood and viscera rained upon his robe.

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My son wanted to be baptized, so I made a suggestion: I thought he should become intimate with the earth. The backyard was as good a place as any to administer the sacrament. It should come from his mother, shouldn't it?

Such a nice son. A well-mannered boy. He tried to scream but his mouth was gagged. For his own good. He didn't understand how important the sacrament was. He didn't know what he was asking for. I didn't want him to be alone, though. Nobody should ever feel alone, least of all my son.

I dropped a skeleton into the pit with him. A lovely young girl who wanted to become a specialist on the French Revolution, like me. She was ambitious and stupid, but she had wonderful bone structure. When I tried to explain to her why the French used the guillotine as a more humanitarian method of execution, she didn't believe me. She protested, so I thought I should model an example of termination that was used before the French became more efficient.

The dirt would be cold for my son at first, but he would get used to it. I made sure the girl was wrapped around him neatly so he would feel comfortable. I added dirt below his neck until his body was buried. Finally, it started to rain.

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My lover is the perfect man. I wrapped the intestines around my waist and cinched them tight to make a belt that would impress him. I thought maybe he enjoyed contemporary fashion, considering he lived on the edge of the multiverse.

I was beginning to understand.

When I heard the sirens, I tried to do what younger girls do; I stood on my head to show the man I admired a headstand. I can bend, I'm athletic; I'm strong and young. My head and hands were inside the stomach of a corpse. See how long my legs are? This is just one of the many tricks I can do.

We looked upon the dead bodies.

Without sharing any words, we knew it was love. Love for the human spirit made this possible. Love and compassion for the unborn millions and for the endless mass of flesh that came before. Our need to protect the future and preserve principles kept the global market churning, the war mongers stuffed, the never-ending war against Oceania preserved. We are at war with outer space.

He sat down and beckoned to me. I couldn't help but think of William the Conqueror. I wanted to lick the edge of a bastard sword and let my saliva and blood fill a golden cup so my lover could drink and be merry.

I sat on his lap and wrapped my legs around his waist. I pushed locks of blood-matted hair away from my eyes so I could look into his pretty face.

I once wrote an essay about the janissaries as a symbol of human perfection. My dissertation had been about the psychological differences between strippers who worked in Soviet Russia and Venezuelan prostitutes who prayed to Mecca. This wondrous man had been my inspiration. I did it all for him, even if I didn't know him.

Gently, I kissed the nape of his neck. I felt the warmth flood my lap while the blade cut across my stomach. I looked down to see my blood froth and run over his midsection. He looked at me and tilted his head. I recognized him and smiled.

What a beautiful boy.

The nature of man laid itself bare for me. I'd known the ultimate sensation and performed the ritual which predated the exposure of my soul to millennia. My name was written in brain across a brick wall.

I didn't feel anything, nor did I try to hold my innards. I knew I could still survive. Help was on the way. But first, I needed to understand how far love could take me. I wanted to make him happy. It was all I ever wanted to do.

Arching my back while holding on to his shoulders, my eyes found the helicopter above us. It was time, at last. They'd found us. It was back to the cold rooms. Back to empty words and mirror-thin silences.

Red and blue light penetrated the darkness. My favorite man let me slide onto the concrete, my vision blurring, my head swimming.

Time was of the essence.

I heard the blade clatter to the pavement.

My son laughed because he was gracious. He was a good boy, and he appreciated everything I taught him about history. What mother wouldn't love him as much as I?







# PISSING MAN CRICKETS

By Roger LeatherWood

Aaron Bair didn't set out to create the kind of biological experiment he perpetrated on his own flesh - a complicated advance in medicine that pushed the boundaries of personal anatomical modification. But it became one even though he had no guidance and no final goal locked in progress - through constant fiddling and disregard for limits, time, social prejudices.

He didn't listen to anyone and no one told him anything he wanted to hear. His father lived with him but he might as well have lived alone. A part-time medic, he was himself wrist-deep in blood and damage, some carved by himself. When one kept at something for so long, they couldn't help becoming expert at it.

Crickets were as moss, arising spontaneously and organically in nature, asexual like maggots on dead flesh. Without benefit of pestal and stamin, no sexual reproduction but constructed from algae and molecules that grew and organized into little parasites of shit and eyes. Bair was always interested in lizards when he was young and tried to graft a tail pulled off a Whiptail Spotted he had yanked and torn in half on purpose onto a California Skink, using red thread and a hooked carpet rug. The first gecko didn't survive the water torture but the second one did. A thin royal jelly oozed from the wound that tasted sweet as powdered chocolate. That's when he knew he could do it - that the creatures of swamp ooze and shadowed brackish scum were adaptable and as fluid as he was stubborn and insistent.

More than once he ordered a box of 500 crickets by overnight to keep and feed his pet, sequestered behind his bed away from his father who hated gray scaly things that hissed and were never where you expected - like Aaron's missing mother - and the cardboard box, with screen mesh inserts to let air in, arrived in the afternoon mail with maybe half the crickets inside, pinhead browns, dead or half-dead and some missing legs, nibbled off by the others. A goo of decay.

Aaron knew that you could revitalize organic matter with a bath of Epsom salt, protein and water. Celery stiffened. He had just had his sometimes girlfriend, Rapsaila use a hollow needle to tattoo a round ladybug doodle onto the inside of his thigh with ink taken from a blue Bic Velocity and the wound was still red on his skin. He hooked the metal ink chamber to a 9-volt and poured the dead crickets into a soup of Red Bull and a tablespoon of his own cum and conducted sparks to the grounded plug and the damp specks of moss

critters seemed to become animated. A cartoon of inorganic piss and dust. Blind food for his crippled Gecko, peeling and skitterish.

The curve of his ulna poked out of his pale skin by the weave of vessels around his wrist. It healed crooked but strong. Aaron slit the tendons across his own rib cage and reached in to feel the viscera and the threads of cartilage inside. He rearranged the tendons supporting organs and his sarcoidotic membrane. The medical books opened in acetate schematics demonstrating the infinite mutation and variance of jostled lymphatic structures. His curiosity was unattended by his teachers, who graded him virtually online, or his father, chasing deeper and wetter orifices on his off days at the hospital to find maternal coital comfort late into 4 nights of the week, regardless of how diseased or sticky the nurse or divorcee's open holes turned out to be. The tools were clean, cheap, Canadian and self-replicating.

Aaron's reconfiguration was part medical invention and part mad scientist. He had never had an aversion to blood, or to bodily fluids, particularly his own. The slick of piss he slept in pooled on the rubber sheets. The vodka numbed pain when mixed with menthol tobacco from a Kool and the insectine poison caused his pink inner tissues to swell and grow mushy, like marshmallow poison ivy. Leafy and calloused. He stayed away from wool and cotton; although they were organic they were absorbent and irritated his clitoral nubs.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, Aaron Bair had learned, and the crickets began to nibble and nest within the caverns and nooks of his inner hepatic aorta diaphragm and lower inguinal pocket along the *inductor brevis* and *inductor longus* muscles, and breed within his spermule matrices. The creatures fed and multiplied within the healing matriculation in a kind of royal jelly and by keeping it open, pink and bleeding Aaron created a closed-feedback defensing cycle within his spleen duct and urinary tracts. Mutual and complementary.

Like an inoculation of causative germatic matter in order to generate depleted cells and then coax a fight with stimulated leukocyte cells against themselves, like a viral infection choking on the proliferation of its own mature corpses that choke and control its own flush, Aaron fed his own disease with the crickets eating off their young, shitting protein into Aaron's bloodstream and infesting his morphed organs so they shifted purpose in reciprocal empathy. He pissed blood and waste was absorbed, and piss flowed out of his wounds, swabbed and fingered amidst the swarm of cricket nymphs. He cried sweat and Cowper's fluid oozed out beneath his fingernails.

His penis shrunk down and widened, the hole at the tip stretching to accommodate and protect new tubular occupants. He pushed the crickets with retuned muscles to scurry out of his penis - but made him erect.

He jerked off to National Geographic magazine and insectine locusts ejaculated from his soft member in drum-beat globules, splishing onto his palm and on the carpet in front of him. Like marbles in bathwater.

Aaron Bair pissed crickets and spat a gruel of dotted wine. His hands held him together and he grew pale hiding behind the cornsilk ivory slatted blinds that kept the back porch light from exposing him to the neighbors. Who had their own personal surgeries to content with. His tongue tasted of sour rice. The television switched off by itself with a timer. It was time for him to find a mate.

\* \* \*

He was proud and frightened. He embraced the nuance of science and scarification into a psychedelic horror of his own new flesh, a sensual and rickety rewriting of his meat corpus. He wanted to show Rapsaila his new self, his love, the orifices and nests of community within his own wounded body and sow within her how, to consume her with the information and the skill. To eat of her and feed her back. But he had not kept in touch and she had committed suicide in that summer.

A rope circling and packaging tight her unhappiness in a lonely and selfish completion, done in her mortal carnal flesh. That wasn't the way to do it - Aaron said as he whispered after her mother said it in careful words of stone - if you were unhappy you changed your self, he whispered to the dead Rapsaila who did not hear.

And he exited his experiment and he entered into society and was shunned. A freak who walked broken and careful, covered with nylon and silk and hiding, unable to smile, to drink, to speak. But this magical thing! This talent to craft a horrified and horrifying creature he was of his own doing. He walked like a broken ballet dancer balancing on loaves of hollow tin. The thin exoskeleton of crickets and other segmented *Orthoptera* were thin and could not support the extra weight of size or sudden shocks of running or a jump from step to stoop.

He moved like a wraith, animated from within by a boiling urine of the living swarm.

He thought of going down to the dock, to nibble through piece by piece the discarded and miserable collection of freaks or diseased drug addicts, pricked and shot and carved by their own hands into an ugly surrender to how the sagging or pickled sheet of flesh could be made to be erotic. A sexuality of skin gone to seed, pinched and razor-burned, tattooed and compliant. But the wharf rats were thick and as he walked along the water a stirring of painful electricity tickled him from inside, like an orgasm of barbed wire, panic in 1000 mandibles, making him scutter away towards a greener field, away from the jaws of the predators and the chlorine and the sun.



Aaron wore a stocking cap and yoga pants that stretched thin over his loins and heaving testicles. He dribbled a thin slime as he walked in *rick-rack* cadence and his erection grew thick with the highway of wet red microcrickets inhabiting the spongy vessels running down and up the organ and into his groin and under a slick canopy of red cottage cheese and pinching intestines, Mobius strips of tendon. He next went to the downtown alleys, to the club district, to a place called Willard's.

The thump of music echoed in his brittle bones and girls with green hair and Bakelite plugs in their lips stood outside smoking. Looking him over.

One said, "Jesus, honey" in a thick lisp, aided by small topaz and turquoise tongue piercings.

"Hello," Aaron chirped. She was slender and short, maybe 5 feet at best, with red hair straight back in a bamboo streak. One eye was the different color than the other, a lens or other appliance.

The music inside turned to syrup in his heart. "Looking for a date?" She was young, possibly underage and not able to get inside without an escort. Her breasts were heavy, one nearly out of her goldfish velvet top, a nipple with its Senna tattoo of Sauron's eye drawing his attention to it.

"I heard the music," he said. They all heard the music. She liked how he smiled, not trying to impress with Deena or Ed Hardy. *He* walked up to *her*, and didn't get too close.

He smelled of pollen. He adjusted the yellowing polystyrene tubing that peaked through his clothing, stiffening from age and wrapped around his thigh. It bound just below the ladybug tattoo, half-finished by Rapsaila months ago.

"Nice gear," she said. She wondered what fetish accoutrement he had further beneath and inside. His nylon wrap was twisting, unable to keep its flat constrictive shape over the so many blocks' walk he'd travelled and he pulled at it, making a shiny wet *clipper-clap*.

She smiled and she pulled the elastic down to show him hers - a round metal Shuriken held on her nipple by a silver piercing, and anchoring what looked like an intricate Mithral chain disappearing down into her nether regions.

"I - I've changed myself," he said breathlessly. A thousand tiny creatures crawled up and down his spinal column and nipped his excitement into a heated flush that made him break out in a sweat, and swell. There were crickets in his stomach.

"Me too, skinny. I like changes." She pulled at her goldfish top again. Her neck was tattooed with what he saw was a row of lizard's teeth, a pattern indiscernible except under a close and expert eye. She took his hand, brushed his arm, the strong one.

A bead of blood escaped from his left nipple. "I like insects. I like to feel how they crawl."

She wanted him to crawl on her. "My name's Anna." She ran a finger under the edge of his clavicle, inches from his experiment opening. "Ever make love in a bed of sticklebacks," she whispered. "I liked to do it on a cobblestone sidewalk. Spent a year in London banging the boys in the clubs outside Piccadilly late Sundays when the bobbies had gone home. Laid out in the street." She looked in his eyes to see how they were twinkling as they listened and drank this information up. "By the Trafalgar Park."

Trafalgar Park, he knew of it. It was near Wilton, where they played polo. Dark and full of vermin and pointy bramblesticks in the crabgrass. All tangled in her pubic hair as she shoved her pants down behind the oaks, scratching the inner crease of her ass as she spread wider and scooted down on the sand to meet his thrusts.

She bit his ear and it came off. She squeezed his crotch to see if he was already hard or if he would be too much work and she felt it undulate and pitch under her hand. And he said, "I want you to eat my cunt" and she laughed and they were upstairs and his ardor nearly caused him to spill his seed there in his codsack. She was so beautiful to him, thin and red, pre-conditioned.

The music moved like water through the mortar and pipes of the converted townhouse, behind stucco and wooden planks. A punk goddess without friends or place to go to tonight pulled him carefully, helping his step light as a gliding chimera up to the row of carpeted hallways. She ducked in a nook and zipped off her black Velcro cargo pants, attached along both sides in fearful symmetry. She wore a silk underwear bodice, high-waisted and tied at the thighs.

She was, Aaron saw, fairly encased. Bound by friction. The Mithral chain snaked down into her underwear, to the center of her vaginal heart. The silk did not irritate her clitoral nubs and to be bound was to be in control of the unconventional and the unexpected nature of her organic modification. Aaron waited, content, controlling all sight.

They unwrapped themselves, separately in the dark, and her fingers explored the new and unnatural medical crevices of his reconstituted structure. She caressed the warm wet collection of his swarming gathering within his throbbing creases. He licked her skin, falling rough and scaled as it lowered to her vestigial openings, her thick sponge of mother meat, bottomless and shiny.

"It grew like this," she whispered in passionate embrace. "I found it easier to feed it."

The molecules of metallic zig-zags disappeared within her, mounted on something deep and out of reach, sensitive and immovable. Her thick patch of thorns were dark red, natural and matching her head, sharp

but soft and Aaron squeezed them with his fingers and they gave but did not snap. He leaned in and licked the short bald fins above her wet gap.

She sighed and there was the smell of earth, of death, of a clean shitty sweat. Of bile and cupcakes, and he ate of her, filling her with the 4 digits of his other hand, the weak one, and she opened up.

“You’re so hard,” she said.

The brace of occupants within teemed with arousal. He looked down - the ridges of his pudenda had created a double-fisted square of muscle in which his penis dropped below - his stomach opening roiling and folded, peeling apart the inner labia of his hearth and Aaron felt his face go flush.

He leaned back. Legs open. “I’m going to - Anna I’m--m--”

And a pissload of deformed grass insects swarmed out of Aaron’s scarified experiment, cumming in spurts like a biblical prophesy from his bladder. His cricket orgasm poured down and over his throbbing cock and over onto her cave, crawling among the fleshy briars of her fuck cavity, filling her . . .

“Oh god - so good,” she croaked as the warm flowed and her stomach swelled and her breasts peaked and sharpened. Her fingers pulled up on the fins and there was a dark, deep, belching fart from within her and then - *the eyes*.

Aaron had exposed his inner bent cavity, and - *eyes*.

And with a sloppy slap the green lizard thing chomped down on the cricket protein chowder flowing like mice onto Anna. The fallopian iguana thing lunged at Aaron, swallowing and feeding on his offerings and he gasped - like twine pulled taut around his groin. A mental matrix of sympathy, of pain, of invisible screams and silent wounds zipped from esophagus down to his scrotal base. *It pulled*.

The toothed cunt ate, licked his spunky mass, stuck its horny head into the hole that was Aaron’s indentation of his own very soul. He pulled out, long as an African snake, coiling out of Anna’s legs and asshole, slick and coming, and the creature rested within Aaron.

Anna was drooling from her mouth, a thin pink paste and her eyes rolled into her head. Aaron leaned forward and pulled the star from her nipple and it ripped the brown skin, dripping a thin black tea.

They folded into each other and neither could be sure who was fucking whom and which was entering where, and that was as he had always wanted it to be and no one had ever said before. Aaron had found his mate and did not have to listen to anything or anyone anymore as long as he kept within - and breeding. Open for this woman with the lizard in her cunny.









# THE CHILD MACHINE

By JOSEPH JUDE

It was called The Child Machine.

It ran on children.

He had first heard of it from Amy, a girl who irregularly appeared at the rescue mission. She always showed up when the guilt was too much. She would spend an hour crying and drinking coffee before disappearing back out into the streets again, despite all of Justin's attempts to rein her in.

This time, however, she had a new story for the case worker. She had taken part in a group activity with several other women and a young but affluent businessman who would occasionally pick her up. This man had solicited Amy enough times for him to trust her, and when he was under enough coke, he decided to tell her a secret; about how, exactly, he accumulated his wealth and power.

It was unreal. Amy believed him though. Especially because, since then, he has avoided her at all costs. It was as if upon sobering up, the businessman realized he had made a bad mistake in spilling his guts. Amy was afraid go to the police so she told Justin. She never lied to Justin.

Justin Beswick was a small, meek person. So small that his head looked out of proportion, and no size clothes would fit right. His eyes were brown little balls in his face, his nose was a beak, and his hair was greasy regardless of how much he washed it. He certainly didn't look like someone a person could run to for protection, but Amy knew him better. He was the one who picked her up from jail or coaxed her into his car from the corner because she needed the money. He stayed at whatever shack she was holed up in when she was trying to kick her habit and needed someone to get her through the night of shakes. He knew her. He believed her story. After a few nights of tossing and turning in bed, he decided to get involved.

Justin waited outside the Jefferson building. It was a tall grey skyscraper, mostly dedicated to Extratense, the



electronics company that Dennis Vogelsen, Amy's former "employer" was chief CEO. The building was strange, designed so that the windows were obscured. It looked like a cold steel missile. Justin wondered if the people who walked into the building thought the same thing. If they felt like they were walking into a big tomb. The clinic where Justin worked was dank and depressing, but this place made him ten times less comfortable.

He waited on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> street for several days until he caught sight of Mr. Vogelsson. It was a little after one o'clock, and Dennis quickly sprang out of a throng of workers taking a smoke break. Dennis had a relaxed air about him, though he walked fast. Justin almost lost him, trying to zigzag through the populous while keeping enough of a distance so that Dennis wouldn't notice he was being followed. He saw Vogelsson duck into Wiggies; an upscale bar and grill.

Justin counted one minute, then entered. He spied Dennis near the window. Justin planted himself at a table near the wall where his quarry was in clear view. He waited. He wanted Dennis to be in the middle of eating his meal and less likely to up and leave. He had just started his veal when Justin strolled over and pulled out a seat.

Mr. Vogelsson stopped eating. He watched this stranger sit down. At first confused, irritation began to creep in.

"Hello?"

Justin spoke very quietly. "You're um, you're Dennis Vogelsson."

"Who are you?" Dennis wasn't in the mood.

"I'm just looking for information."

"Waitress!"

Almost inaudible: "about the child machine."

Right away, Dennis' expression froze. His left eye twitched a few times, and his tongue clicked inside his half open mouth, trying to produce something to say on its own since his brain shut off. Justin observed his behavior, as afraid as Dennis clearly was. Justin was just doing a better job of not showing it.

Dennis rocketed straight up, knocking his chair over. He barely managed to grab his coat as he clobbered his way out of the diner in less than a second, leaving the rest of the place staring at Justin for an explanation.

"He owes me ten bucks."

The event confirmed Amy's tale, but did little else. Justin certainly lost the element of surprise. In fact, he wondered if he would even see Dennis ever again. Worse, what would the CEO do to make sure Justin never saw him again.

Nevertheless, Justin summed up his courage to return to the corner to wait. It was his very first day back when he

was approached, and not by Dennis.

It was a dark, seven-foot-tall man with a thick black beard and even blacker glasses. Justin saw himself shivering in the two mirrors that obscured the man's eyes.

"You asked a question last week." His voice was so low, Justin wondered if he was actually hearing it, and maybe not having it pushed into his brain.

"I-asked a question?"

"Don't play stupid with me."

"I spoke with Mr. Vogelsson...briefly."

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"Do what I say."

"Sorry...yes sir."

Justin followed the large man to a dark green Jaguar parked on the next block. Justin was shown his place in the back seat. The man said nothing else, and never looked at Justin again as he chauffeured him out of the city.

They drove for almost an hour. Justin could see the daylight leaving him. As anxious as he was, he honestly didn't think he was being taken somewhere to be killed, at least not in the beginning. As the destination grew more obscure, Justin started to feel a tight knot forming in his stomach. At one point, he addressed the driver with a weak "excuse me...sir". There was no response, and Justin decided to wait it out.

Darkness had fully blanketed the area when the car nestled into the garage of a secluded house in the woods. It was a wide three story residence with a contemporary stucco frame exterior. There were trees cocooning it from all sides, but the guest houses, stables, and atrium were all visible. The place was luxurious. Justin was slightly relieved that it wasn't an abandoned barn he was taken to. Still, he wasn't feeling too much better. The way the house was eerily quiet and cold. It wasn't an inviting place.

It was like the Jefferson Building.

After being buzzed in by the owner. Justin was taken through the house to a large room with a few sofas and a bar, and left alone to wait. Justin sat on the largest settee and peeked all around, at the plants and mirrors and flower wallpaper, not that anything he was seeing rang any kind of significance. Soft classical music was faintly detectable. He couldn't shake the chill.

The door opened, and an older woman entered, her hair was braided up into dreads and tied behind her head. She wore soft colors with a rococo pattern on her shirt, but her face was as emotionless as the chauffeur. Holding a

glass of red wine, she lounged down on the couch across from his, looked Justin over for a minute.

“My name is Reba. You want to know about The Child Machine.”

“Yes.”

“What do you already know about it?”

“I hear it grants wishes.”

“It grants one wish. Only one. No strings attached. No consequences. Anything a man or woman wants.”

“But they have to pay a fee. Right?”

“I own the machine so they must pay me to use it, but that’s not what you’re referring to, is it?”

“No..there’s something else, the person must provide um, something for the machine.”

“They must provide its fuel.”

“I-I don’t understand it.”

She waited a beat, just watching him.

Then a slight smile appeared.

“I’ll tell you the story. I enjoy telling it”

After taking a long sip of her drink, she begin.

“Sometime in the Eighteen Hundreds, a blacksmith built a toy for his two year old son. It was a small tin motorized locomotive that could be wound up with a key. Around the same time he had completed it, his son had developed a strong fever and within a week, the child was dead. It was bundled in a basket to be taken to the town doctor, when the blacksmith sat down with the locomotive. He began to cry, wishing more than anything that his boy would come back, the blood that the child had coughed up still on his hands.”

“Then a strange thing happened. The blacksmith wound the locomotive. And when it ran its wheels, the child stirred. It was alive. It was healed. The town doctor had no explanation for it, but the blacksmith knew what did it. He didn’t know why or what forces the locomotive used to bring his boy back, but somehow, he knew exactly what had happened.”

“He also knew more must be done. He added additional parts to the locomotive, all sorts of metal gears and pulleys whose function he couldn’t understand. He didn’t know what he was building, just that he had to keep adding to it. Soon it was big enough to stand on its own, a collage of pieces intricately joined together.”

“Then came the day for it to be tested. A young girl was attacked by a wild dog and killed. The blacksmith told the girl’s father about the device he had, and what it could do. He gave the girl to the machine to process it, and when it was done, the girl had reappeared healthy and alive, and so the blacksmith added more to the machine. It

became his lifelong work.”

Reba took another long sip.

“It wasn’t until after he died that the full scope of the machine was realized. The people who found the machine locked away in their cellar discovered that it couldn’t just bring the children given to it back. It could grant any wish. Of course, a child was still required to fuel the device. Over the years, various people, through intuition from an outside source and much trial and error, made the rules of what The Child Machine did clear.”

“How did you wind up with it?”

“I believe I will spare you that part.”

Justin didn’t say anything, still taking it all in. His head dropped down.

Reba spoke again.

“You will pay me exactly twenty five thousand dollars.”

Justin looked up at her, stunned. “I don’t have that kind of money.”

“I suggest you get it.”

“What about the child?”

“I provide that. But it must be your blood child. You could leave your seed with me tonight if you’re ready.”

Justin wasn’t ready for this. It didn’t occur to him that he might have to commit to this immediately. If he backed out now, even to just think about it, it’s likely that he would not be approached again.

“Um, okay. Sure.”

He was led to a large black guest bathroom and given a little plastic cup. Reba sat in the room with him to watch the entire process, emotionless about the whole thing. It was business. Justin definitely had a difficult time getting in the mood. He was afraid to ask that she leave. He eventually was able to force himself to complete that part of the transaction, using a memory of an adult film he caught on cable the previous week. Reba said nothing as she led him back to the waiting room. He didn’t see her again. Instead the Chauffeur returned to lead him to the car. He felt like he was going to throw up.

It wasn’t a bad system, Justin thought to himself as he was driven home. He provides the sperm now, and will most certainly run into the gentleman at the wheel again when it’s time to pay up. He only had Reba’s word that it had to be his sperm, or that she had the machine at all. This could all be one colossal scam. After he pays them, a dead hooker could show up somewhere with his sperm on her, and he spends the rest of his life in jail. Justin still wasn’t sure where he would get the money. He considered taking out a loan. He doubted he would get one that high for no good reason. It was clear that most people wished for wealth, and paid back their debt that way, but his



wish was for something else. His only hope was that he could get to the machine first before being required to pay. It was odd that he had to shell out such an exorbitant fee. Reba must have made quite a living off the machine. Not that it was entirely effortless. She didn't say if it was her or someone else, but his sperm would be administered to some woman to cultivate the child. Justin wondered that maybe wealth wasn't the wish she had made, so what was it?

Nine months passed and Justin didn't hear from them. His credit rating was good enough to warrant a loan from the bank. He obtained it around the eighth month, under the guise of wanting to buy a new house. He even went through all the motions, finding a nice place across state. If he didn't have to back out at the last minute, he might actually have bought the place.

One day, out of the blue, the Chauffeur appeared again. It was on Justin's way to work, a clear sign that they had been keeping tabs on him. No matter, he thought to himself, there was no way they could tell what he was going to do. He told his plan to no one. He never even brought it up with Amy again. She still popped in occasionally so they obviously didn't care who knew. Justin guessed it helped business. He would've thought they would be a little concerned that a cop would find out. Maybe they figured that only the ne'er-do-wells could have access to such a story. Boy, what they didn't know.

The Chauffeur popped right in front of Justin as he was about to step on the subway train.

"It's ready."

"It is?"

"We want the money."

"Oh, of course."

Justin was driven back to his house to retrieve the payment. He had it changed into a money order which he kept in a metal box under his bed. The bank had phoned him a few times about the money, but he never returned the calls.

Justin walked out of his apartment building and around the corner where the Chauffeur was waiting out of sight in a doorway. Justin handed him the slip of paper which was already soaked with sweat. The writing was still legible.

The Chauffeur looked at it, his mouth twisted down for a few seconds.

"Let's go."

The Chauffeur escorted him to the Jaguar and the trip repeated, a silent ride down along with the sun. About

some time after nine, they arrived at Reba's home and were escorted in. He sat in the same room, waiting for approximately the same period before Reba appeared. She didn't sit down. She stayed at the door and spoke.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes...where's the..."

He caught himself pausing. He became afraid that if he didn't seem entirely ready for this, Reba would know something was up. The type of person who would do this wouldn't pause, wouldn't care.

"You'll see."

Reba reached out her hand. Justin instantly took it and followed her. He was making an effort to push all thoughts out of his mind. He had to look the part.

He settled on the sound of his heartbeat as Reba led him through the halls to a small door at the end. It opened to another small room that contained only a table, a chair and an ashtray. Justin refused to think. He just let it go.

Reba walked to the wall to their right and pushed. A section of it opened as it was a secret door. Reba led him down a staircase with no light. Justin couldn't see where it ended. He kept thinking about his heartbeat.

A light flashed in his face. A door opening at the bottom of the steps. She took him through a dark tunnel. Flood lights set up with extension cords leading out of sight lit the way. Reba walked to the end where a steel door waited.

She pulled a key out of her pocket, and unlocked a large padlock, once brass, now rusted green. The door opened, and inside was a room of red bricks.

And The Child Machine.

It was a strange contraption. Justin tried his best to make out just what it did. It was essentially a huge metal square composed of junk. A ragged mess of pipes, gears, and chains. So many joints connected into other joints which fed in and out of the mass that it was impossible to ascertain just what piece led to what. There was no beginning, no entry hatch or lid or levers to control it.

"How does it work?"

"You'll see."

Justin noticed a small black box, about two feet long and one foot high, sitting in the corner. Reba stepped over to it, and pulled the handle on top, lifting it. It was a lid coving a steel slab with an infant sleeping on top.

Justin tried to block it out, but the thought broke through.

"Our child".

Reba picked up the slab, walked it over to Justin. He inspected the baby, he couldn't tell if it was a girl or a boy

but he did see the resemblance to Reba.

She was handing the slab to him. "Place it in front of the machine, and then wind it up."

Justin reached out as Reba placed the plate in his arms. He stared at the machine. He tried to erase his mind again. Before he could stop himself, he quickly stepped over to the device and laid the slab down directly in front of it. Somehow he knew exactly where to look.

At the base, right next to the floor, a tiny steel key was visible. It was the key to the locomotive, still accessible despite all the modifications.

Justin was breathing heavily. He couldn't swallow, he slammed his fist down and then his throat cleared.

"Just do it." He ordered himself.

He reached out his fingers, delicately placing them tightly on the key, and turned, and turned again, and then again. At the last turn, he felt the click. The mechanics went into motion. Justin backed up, trying to get a fix on where the sounds were coming from. They were scattered throughout the machine. Wrenches and pistons slid in and out, the gears spun, pulling the chains. Steam fired out of crevasses, and sweat oozed down from every source.

It was the normal whirls and rattles of an engine. Then they became stranger, more unsettling. High pitched shrieks and multiple clatters like an electric rattlesnake echoed over itself a hundred times. The noises reverberated all around the brick walls, swallowing Justin. He stepped away from the machine, timid. His attention turned to the slab.

"Oh God."

The baby roused from the commotion. Its eyes started to unsquint, and take in the view of the large apparatus before it. It focused as a rack slid out from the front to extend right over. Several steel needles protruded from the rack, arranged in a small cross directly proportioned to its intended. Justin knew he should look away, but sheer curiosity made him keep his sights fixed. That, and a sense of responsibility which he was trying to fight.

The rack fixed itself in position, just as the child opened its mouth.

And then the rack slammed down.

The cry was horrific, due to a piercing of the throat among the other parts. The end of the rack, whose needle impaled the head, folded down, pushing the head back so that the child could see Justin standing behind it. This also allowed the whole rack to flip up entirely backwards while holding the fuel steady. Through a space among the workings, it retracted back into the machine, allowing the backside of the child exposure for other mechanisms that pulled out. The head was now pushed back to look skyward.

The fuel was basically flush with the front of the machine. Hooks appeared on thin metal arms in the device. From both the left and right, they slammed into the child's back pulling the skin away as the body was yanked deeper into the machine. Justin couldn't think now even if he wanted to. His eyes were frozen on the sight of the mechanism rolling the child throughout its insides. Pins and drills made their way into the child, clasp into specific pieces of anatomy, and removing them with precision. Through the motorized pieces that whirled and clicked, the baby continued to reappear over and over at different junctions, every time, a hideous new sight. Teeth were yanked out through holes in the neck, screens pushed through muscle to dice the flesh into needed increments, fingers pulled off as the veins were sewn closed to avoid bleeding.

Indeed, the machine was hardly as chaotic as it appeared, but actually as intricately devised as genius would allow. Innumerable functions were performed at once to keep the child alive as long as possible, to remove only the parts necessary, and divvy them off to the proper divisions of the appliance without waste. Inside the giant mass, transparent tubes shuffled blood to diverse sections. Small treadmills transferred the cargos of meat and bones. Fingernails and vertebrae shuffled side by side down twin slides, and the eyes were lifted upward by two lines into the clutter. After a while, there was no longer one set bulk that was trundled through the apparatus. It became two, then five, then an insubstantial number of body parts rolling in and out until the whole machine resembled a red tornado in the center of the brick room.

The red started to disappear. The machine grew clean again. The instruments wound down, and the machine quieted. The child was digested into its vast form. Justin stood immobile in shock, and then he noticed the only sound was the locomotive key slowing down to a halt.

Justin felt it. Like a strong wind slammed into him. He knew what it was. He knew he had the power. He could make his wish.

He thought it to himself. "I wish..."

Since he had first heard about the device, he deduced what would be the best approach, what he would have to do to make everything alright.

"I wish..."

They never checked him, the morons. They underestimated him. They didn't know what he had. What he picked up at the house, held in the steel box along with the money order.

He had the pistol ready. It was a Kel-Tec P-11; a pocket pistol that he had stuffed into his pants before leaving the apartment. He was originally going to hold the Chauffeur at gunpoint and force the man to take him to Reba, but the Chauffeur stuffed him into the back of the car without a second thought, allowing Justin to bite his time. He



was taking out his gun, doing it close to his chest so that Reba couldn't see it.

"I wish I had all the children back."

It was the wish that made the most sense. He thought about wishing the machine never existed, but he wasn't sure how such a paradox would work. All he wanted was to save the children.

They appeared. Reba saw them first. The wish took a bit of force out of Justin, and he was dizzy for a moment. After, he turned behind him. In the corner where the lid was stored were thirty or so slabs, each with a living, healthy child on it. Most were infants, though there were a few older children looking around, confused. Probably as confused as when their parents laid them in front of the machine to begin with.

Reba turned back to Justin, knowing something was up.

"What are you doing?"

"If I tell you what I wished for, it won't come true."

He fired off a shot, hitting Reba in the leg. She dropped to the ground with a loud yell, grabbing her wound.

"Don't move. Don't move."

Justin heard the steps in the distance. The Chauffeur raced in, reaching into his jacket. Justin, already pointing his gun at Reba, spun quickly and emptied three shots into the man, sending him limp to the ground. Reba watched her accomplice drop, then looked back at Justin.

She was smiling.

Justin stared for a second, gun still pointed, trying to read her. His fear rose.

"What's that look? What the hell?"

He paused for a second, not sure what to do, then a thought hit him.

"What do you wish for?"

Reba kept her grin, though for the first time she looked very weak.

"I wished for you."

A chill ran down Justin's spine. Even though she wasn't moving he felt as though a train was rushing at him.

Justin shot her. Reba was down with a bullet through her skull, ending any question Justin had about what should be done with the mother of his child.

He couldn't believe what he just did. He had never shot someone before. He planned on simply wounding both of them. He didn't want to have to kill anyone. "No matter," he thought to himself, "It had to be done." He tried to stay focused.

Justin took one of the slabs that were on the floor, a sizable weapon he could use to beat the machine into pieces. He whacked at the steel behemoth, over and over. He took a shot at any part of it that he could find. During that time, the Chauffeur made no movement. Justin wasn't sure if he was unconscious, dead, or just lying in wait. The fear that the man would spring back up before Justin was finished added to his energy. He didn't care how loud he was. Soon, he became aware of nothing but the passion of whacking away at the complex metal web. The noise was amazing. Even here, there was that morbid tinge that the machine's earlier reverberation left in Justin's soul. The racket made the children cry.

Unfortunately, all his work didn't make a dent in the thing. He stepped away, out of breath, looking at the machine which barely suffered a scratch.

Justin pulled out and pocketed the locomotive key.

Next, he had to get the children out. He dragged the Chauffeur's body away from the doorway. He slid easily on the pool of his blood. Justin carefully reached into the man's pockets, looking for car keys. The left pocket yielded nothing.

Reach for the right.

A clang. Just one of the slabs falling over. Not the Chauffeur. The Chauffeur was evidently dead. Both he and Reba were dead. Even if he wasn't, Justin was ready. He was emotionally cocked and loaded

The keys were there.

Justin moved the children a few at a time, a few feet at a time. He wanted to leave none behind. The process was laborious, and he wanted to keep an eye on the bodies.

He was able to get all the children out without much interference, even though that didn't stop his fear. The feeling that something evil could fall on him at any minute was as real as ever to him. He ran the children through the house to the car. He placed them in the back seat, using some blankets he found on his way to cover them and act as padding since there weren't enough seat belts. He ran all the children through, four at a time. It seemed to take forever.

"Just a few more. Get them out of here."

He couldn't get the last four out of the house fast enough. Passing the phone, he made a call to the police, telling them that there were two dead bodies in the basement, and left the phone off the hook for them to trace. He fled the house, not looking back, hoping he would never have to see inside again. He climbed into the Jaguar, filled with his treasure, and then sped out of there.

He thought forever about what he could tell the police. In the end, he decided on the truth. No excuse he could come up with would work as well. He had the evidence he needed in the back. The children had to belong to someone. They could test the DNA, Justin figured. He had Dennis Vogelsson to start off with. There was also Reba who was the mother of all the children. Piece together the rest from what was left behind at the house, piece it all together over time. It really didn't matter. All that mattered was that he got the children out of there. As for the money order, it wasn't on either body. Getting that money back would be tricky. He was confident he would figure something out.

Justin stopped at a police station near his house, bringing some officers out to collect the children and listen to his tale. He slept at the station, a bit shaken up from the incident and the several interviews from detectives. He admitted everything: what he had done with Reba, shooting two people, why he had done it all. The next morning, he was let go, although police visited him at his house a few times for follow up questions. When he asked how the investigation was going, he would get no answers. The news and papers reported nothing. The only thing he was told was that the children were alright, and currently in hospital care.

The next few months were a blur. He answered questions the best he could. His own queries were met with less certain replies, when he got them at all. Even the status of Dennis remained a mystery. He wondered if connections to many people in high places were established, and quickly covered up. No scandal concerning Dennis sending his son off to be mutilated ever surfaced. Then again, how could it when said child was alive and well. Justin waited on that familiar corner a few times. Sure enough, Dennis came out every day to go home or to eat lunch, many times at Wiggies.

As for the machine, he never knew what they discovered at her house. All they would tell him is the case is still pending.

He also wasn't sure what the state of the children would be. Most of them were placed in foster care. Justin had some friends in youth services who kept him up to speed on the children. A couple kids were adopted, though Justin soon became aware of the stark reality that most would never find homes. His experience forecast too much of their future. Justin later learned that some had to be taken away from their new parents for various reasons: drugs, abuse. One child was killed all over again when his new mother shook him too much because he wouldn't sleep. Amy was also found dead of an overdose. She was hidden in an alley, face down in her own vomit. Justin started to wonder if he really saved these children or just moved them from one agonizing death to another.

There was still the matter of his own son. He admitted it was his, and was always curious what the staff thought when they watched him take it out of the hospital. He looked at the baby for hours, just staring at it in the basket where it slept peacefully. He noticed it had his eyes swimming in Reba's features. He also definitely remembered such parts being forcibly removed by the steel mandibles of the machine, and it all became too much for him. After a while, he couldn't even look at the boy. Finally he gave it up for adoption.

Once again, he was alone in his apartment. Alone with the memories of what he did, and what it had yielded.

The rain hammered the window in huge heavy thumps. Justin sat on his bed in the dark, hearing every last raindrop. He imagined each one was the sound of another child hitting, another person getting away with their terrible acts. He opened his hand to look at the locomotive key. The bills and expenses had piled up, his life had fallen apart. He found he just didn't care anymore.

He no longer noticed the raindrops. Justin began to see how easy it would be to place the key back in the machine. To have people pay him for the privilege of turning it. He would watch human after human come through to reinforce his newfound convictions.

And maybe one day, someone might come through and answer his new wish, the wish to see a human being turn the key for something good instead of something horrible. And on that day, he can, at last, be put out of his misery.





# There is no Ferryman

## By Shawn Milazzo

This is automatic writing from what I believe to be the old ones or what man perceives as diabolic entities.

An unholy awakening occurred last night while I drifted from plane to plane. A depth of lucid nightmare, spiraling to an indescribable descent so deep that man was not meant to venture. I have been studying more arcane knowledge lately, particularly what you would call as necromancy and mediumship. I have learned in my life that I possess a certain channeling ability of otherworldly creatures and things.

I have made it my lifes work to travel physically and astral to earth's and beyond's foulest places. It is written in the stars for me to bear witness to the events and to record them so that mankind can learn the true nature of chaos. For example: One place in my travels, in the physical realm has been the catacombs below Paris. With somewhere near six million people's lives that have ended and have been buried under the streets of "The city of love." I have trespassed, perverting the rest of the dead by invocation, swallowing the lifeless cold still air and the souls of murderers, thieves, child touchers, rapists and other immoral criminals.

Other examples are infiltrating funeral services and fornicating with the deceased, while wearing their clothes stolen from their home. I have amputated autopsy corpses while bathing in their fecal matter, still in trance, speaking unutterable languages and drank bagot goat urine. I have performed erotic séances on dirty cement floors of suicide victims using the crime scene chalk outline as the portal. The other examples are too unspeakable to even confess.

Last night, I had a breakthrough in what man would define as the underworld. But beware, this is sacrilege to many.

Surprisingly, at first, a blast of pale light blinded my eyes. I'm assuming the light and blindness was an illumination of immense enlightenment power with no overwhelming sensations quickly following. This must be what people describe as "The white light." Or "Follow the white light in the tunnel." It is purely a shame how so many believe that this is a place of tranquility, goodness or a utopian sanctuary.

Nothing is divine in this place.

A caterwaul pitch deafens your ears, possibly from a nameless being whose language cannot be perceived by anything of life, after gaining sight. I grasped my head as I fell to my knees from the sound, shaking profusely from the after effect. Hours seem to pass in minutes here, so realistically I was probably blind for hours and deaf for less.

When I found the strength to get back up from the ground which originally was white, It now became vines and fungal things atop a stone road. I gained my sight and hearing completely back. The only way to describe the requiem of this world is a deep low wail, like wind tunneling through a forgotten cave at high velocity that felt sentient.

I dared not to find the abomination that produced the sound, for fear I would never return among the living. The air was dead and I even forgot to breathe. Although, I do not believe air even existed here because nothing was alive. No movement was shown from my clothing or hair and no breeze came from the sound that surrounded me. It was, as if I was in outer space.

The ancient doors to the sepulcher hovered over me and stood at least a hundred feet tall and wide. The blackened ash gates were etched in eldritch metals. I felt an overwhelming sense of fear and terror with each step taken closer to the doors. I could tell the entrance was meant for monsters and not for men. What man needed such vast an entrance? The writings and symbols on the doors were archaic, glowing like hot lava that swirled and danced to unrecognizable evils. I feared contact with the monolith but pressed on. Before my hand met the door a powerful electric feeling of carnage came over me. I must of subconsciously closed my eyes from the hollowness that followed after and after that, I was on the other side.

What resembled the City of Dis quickly became a burial ground for everything on earth. I saw a water system that was all tapped out and dry to the bone, literally. The walls were a mixture of every single documented Homo Sapien for burial rites. I saw parts of ancient Egyptian sand drop from age onto jungle ruins of South America entwining vines to Mayan slabs of stone. Neanderthal sticks formed structured walls that hid caves lost in time. An near infinite of men inhibited pillars that supported this place. The petrified deceased men that protruded from the pillars were caked in gore and what else is seen internally inside us.

The amount of abysmal horror and fascination I saw was unfathomable. Intestines sprawled the ceiling and hung in a decorative fashion, children and animal carcasses played with each other in a eerie fog of dissonance while simultaneously other circumstances occurred. Skeletons were cased in charred glass as if studied or theatricality mocked. Whatever event I came across I noticed at least one thing that was a reoccurring theme, the only thing that seemed alive was either an embalming fluid of some kind or an insidious ectoplasm. In fact, it began to manifest onto everything, dripping, crawling, oozing, it grew.

The liquid that I believed was drained from the weird septic water system could have possibly been this fluid that carried itself to the floor beyond the displayed corpses.

For the first time being here, I felt like I was being watched by something purely inhuman and not merciful. A gravitational pull wanted, needed, me to look at its focal point as the wails and moans became louder. I did everything I could to refuse the possession of my body and knew I had to leave in the utmost urgency. I did see what it wanted me to see from the corner of my eye though, not fully but enough. The best way for me to describe what I hope to forget to see burned into the surface of my eye and face is some kind of slithering tentacles that lacked any color. This thing was like the sun but aware. I hope to never experience this place again.

I woke up soaked in sweat but not just any kind of sweat, blood. My girlfriend told me I woke up and sat upright screaming. I looked down with a blurred eye and saw the crimson stains on the near virgin white bedspread. I wiped a greenish substance spilling from my eyes and it evaporated. The bed was covered in dirt and maggots moved around aimlessly with no sense of direction, I jumped out of the bed and probably out of my soul. I collected the sheets, balled them up and threw them in our fire pit. I will huff the fumes from the fire later.

I bent over our sink in the bathroom and tried to wash my face but an acid like burn prevented me from touching my left side. It is as if the being I saw left its mark on me. I have a charcoal impression on my face permanently and as I write this, I'm becoming rapidly blind in my left eye. The iris and pupil of my left eye are damaged and are molding into each other at a sickening speed. My chest and stomach are left with claw marks. My once loyal dog will no longer allow me to touch him.

However/whatever you define the place I went to, I know, the infestations there were horrendous, the impressions are permanent and the possession is non-dormant. I also know that regardless of what you believe as afterlife one thing is very clear - there is no Ferryman.











# VAMPUSSY PT. 2

## ALEX S. JOHNSON

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Johnny New One was nursing a tall blue drink at the Pachyderm Bar in West Lulu when the doctor shambled in.

“I seen some things, man,” said the doctor, quickly demolishing three margaritas in a row.

Always on the lookout for new screenplay material when not hustling his ass for blow, Johnny immediately took an interest in the man. “Thirsty work, eh?” he said as a conversation opener.

The man was wearing a lab coat streaked with a matted blood, hair and something that closely resembled jissom, but with a different consistency and a slight glow to it. He wiped the copious sweat from his forehead with a cocktail napkin and answered Johnny, still staring into his margarita glass, “I’ll have your answer in a second. First, total annihilation of consciousness. You wouldn’t happen to have any elephant tranquilizer on you, by any chance?”

“No, man, that’s heavy stuff. Hey, aren’t you some kind of doctor? Why can’t you write a script for yourself?”

“Grimpel Slappy, Miskatonic U. Medical School, class of ’96. Pleased to meet you.”

“Pleasure’s mine, dude. So, uh, are you upset about something? Sometimes it helps to talk. Maybe you should slow down with those drinks.”

“Talk? Sure. You seem like a friendly guy.”

“What’s all that stuff on your lab coat?”

“Oh, that? Mostly what it looks like. Listen buddy, my advice to you...is just walk away. I made my own bed, now I’m gonna lie down in it.”

“It’s all good,” said Johnny. “I was just on my way to get my ass reamed for blow, but I’ve got about an hour till I gotta be at this guy’s place. I’d really like to hear your story.”

“You a reporter or something? ‘Cause I tried to go to the press. They kicked me out of the office, the *Times*...some asshole in a bow tie. Say, who do you know who wears a bow tie anyway?”

“No, I’m not a reporter. Sometimes I try my hand at writing screenplays, though.”

“Doesn’t matter. I jess need a fren, someone to lissen...” And Slappy proceeded to pour forth the saga of his woes, omitting no wet and shiny detail. At a few points Johnny was forced to slap his new friend forcefully to shake him off the subject of hamster farts and his yen for Coco Puffs, but over half an hour, the story emerged.

Johnny felt stunned, pole-axed, and not in the good way. As the best-paid bun boy in Beverlywood and West Lulu combined, he had seen, heard and felt things to make the Marquis de Sade shit himself with disgust and loathing. But Dr. Slappy’s story opened whole new vistas of depravity. And would make a great screenplay, once Johnny had done some research and expanded his knowledge of genetics, vampirism, quantum mechanics,

wormholes in spacetime and the instability of certain vampire bat-pussy hybrids. All of which seemed to have some kind of esoteric relationship to a book titled the *Necronomicon*, by the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred. Apparently this was now a required textbook at Miskatonic U. The *Necronomicon* spoke of portals through which a race of transdimensional aliens, called The Old Ones or The Elder Gods, might slip into the mundane world for unknown purposes. Slappy had warned Johnny of the consequences of investigating this book, but Johnny figured that it would help him understand the genesis of the Vampussy, and even suggest a way to defeat them, or shut them out.

Back in his cramped studio apartment in LaLaHood, Johnny Googled till his hands cramped. At first he retrieved a lot of garbage, websites that led him into virtual cul-de-sacs filled with pop-ups advertising something called “The Shwibly.” But after solid effort, punctuated by frequent bathroom trips to douche his asshole of a loathsome combination of black tar heroin, spunk and fruit juice, he began to hit paydirt. The seemingly random search words began to generate the same results, over and over, pointing to a club in West Lulu called Bela’s Brew-Ha Ha.

That Friday afternoon, Johnny took Buñuel down to Jodorowsky and found the club, literally a hole in the wall. Stepping through the crack, he was accosted by a 6’ 2” heavily muscled bald man, who seized him by the shoulders, head-butted him and flipped him over on his back.

“How you find this place?” asked the bouncer.

“I...uh...from your website? It has the street address right on it.”

“Oh,” said the bouncer. “Sorry. Internet. Sven is old school.”

“You’re Sven?”

“Yeah. Sven Lundquist. Sorry about the rough stuff. We get a lot of looky-loos here. You’re not a looky-loo, are you?”

“I’m not sure what that even means,” said Johnny. “Hey, could you give me a hand? I think you crushed my spinal column or something.”

The bouncer extended a meaty hand. “Sure. Looky-loos are hipsters, you know, trash. Guys with ironic mustaches.”

Johnny unconsciously felt his own mustache. “Well yeah, I do have facial hair, but it’s not meant to be ironic. Just a goatee. Say, what’s the idea?”

“You come here for show?”

“Sure, I came here for a show. But now I think I need some elephant tranquilizers and a long sauna bath.”

“You come with Sven, he fix you up.”

After several elephant tranquilizers and a satisfying sauna, Sven gave Johnny a free back massage and readjusted his bones. “Show’s on the house. You sit back and enjoy.”

Oddly enough, Johnny’s back felt better than before it had been recalibrated.

In front of a backdrop with a vaguely Dali-esque painting of rhinoceri coupling, some saggy-titted, overweight strippers performed a fairly conventional Three Stooges routine. A jittery clown played a Chopin piano etude as the waitresses, long, thin girls dressed as macabre scarecrows, took drink orders. Johnny waved his hand in demurral, satisfied with the pachyderm trunks. Part of him wished he’d fled the bar as soon as the doctor showed up in the splattered lab coat with the frenzied story, but another part of him was hooked. He

wanted to see how the whole narrative would unfold. Would it be happy feeding time at Pussy Palace, his veins coursing with novel drugs, or would it be the usual bukkake-dunking and dreary, wheezing evocation of a Weimar cabaret scene trapped in a Jello cube?

Johnny hated that whole Weimar Jello scene with a passion. He peered suspiciously at the dimly-lit stage. Three spotlights made random Venn diagrams through purple gel, revealing an elaborate, resinous stain on the floor. On closer inspection, the stain took on a Weimar Jello aura and Johnny closed his eyes shut, emphatically squeezing out *those particular memories*.

Then a new clown sat down at the piano and began to play a slow, doomy intro. Dry ice poured across the stage, and an oddly-shaped shadow poured itself across the painting. Johnny wiped his eyes and saw what was projecting the shadow. And felt an icy sensation in his guts.

It was her—the creature from Slappy’s narrative. Vampusseria.

“I am zooooo ferry eggsited to be here with you today,” droned Vampusseria. “As some of you know, I haff bin mekking a few unannounced appearances at local clubs promoting my new owl-boom, which iss aailable in download form only. Eet iss called Neeco Poooshy. You all should hear it. Some uff my very best werk.”

Vampusseria landed on a table, and took a few drags from a long ebony cigarette holder it held in its talons. Exhaling a cloud of blue smoke from its labia, the former cult icon turned pussybat tapped its claws, as though tuned in to her own personal radio station.

“I now sing medley of greatest heets,” she said.

The club was starting to fill up now. Hipsters of every description sauntered in, some completely nude, others shrink-wrapped in cellophane. They exuded a palpable aura of decadence, exhaustion with everything, a world-weariness that went far beyond standard-issue ennui. Their skin writhed with complex tattoos featuring Mom, bison, lanced reptiles and several varieties of carnivorous cheese-creatures. Johnny noted that a few of the hipsters even sported eyeball piercings and had the furtive look peculiar to acolytes of socket sodomy.

The hipsters assumed elaborate worshipful attitudes before the stage, clustering together before their idol.

Nico pussybat spread her wings over them as they gathered in, yearning for just a taste of that splendid, salty, hypertrophied clitoris. They nipped at the end and clamped their teeth to its sides, jostling for a chance to suck it. The pussybat picked up a microphone.

“Thee sees the ent, my only frent, thee ent...”

As the lyrics issued from her lips, the hipsters began to writhe in ecstasy, performing spirited whip-dances in tribute to Gerard Malanga. A DAT backing tape played an accompaniment from hidden speakers, shrieking synthetic noises, like rubberized insects splattering against a windshield, stabbing riffs from an electric guitar, as the rhythm quickened; the melody became jangled, incoherent, matched by the frenzied movements of the hipsters.

“Lost in a Roman veelderness uff pain...”

They were tearing raw hunks from one another, lips foaming with blood. Johnny watched in shock and amazement as the hipsters ground against each other, as the Nicopussybat gyrated above them, feeding on them as they fed on one another. The stage was awash with a widening pool of blood and jissom flecked with organ meats.

As the song arced to its climax, the Oedipal allegory of the killer in the ancient gallery, the worshippers looked whipped and buffeted by psychic winds, some half-skeletal now, slippery clusters of nerves sliding through new holes that opened up in chests and shoulders and legs, a vast procession of erosion working its way through the dancing flesh...Johnny scanned the room for an exit, and saw a light coming from a door to the right of the stage.

But what if they spotted him? He had to take that chance. If he stayed, he'd be swallowed up in the ravening maw of the ritual. Ducking his head down and scurrying past the stage like an insect, Johnny didn't bother to check if they saw him or not. He breathed the cold outside air with a mixture of relief and lurking fear. He could still hear the music playing, the coda, winding down now as the song ended.

Now what was he going to do? He made his way through the parking lot and raced down the street, past shuttered storefronts and gas stations, trying to put some distance between himself and the mad scene he'd just witnessed.

Finally he could run no longer. He slumped against a wall, breathing hard, sweat pouring down his face. When he heard the voice: "Meeester Johnny, you left beefor all ze fun!"

*I am so fucked,* thought Johnny.

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Von Hulking swabbed himself with a towel, laid it back on the workout bench and picked up the cell phone. It was Lydia's voice mail.

"Lydia, I've been trying to call you for days. What happened to you? Get back in touch."

He went back to doing reps with the free weights when something on the TV screen over his head caught his eye. They were interviewing some guy; Von couldn't hear what he was saying, but the closed captioned translation had something to do with a savage attack that had taken place the previous night, four blocks from Lydia's apartment.

The man looked ashen, talking some gibberish about fertility rituals, bicycles in Ibiza, a hybridized bat-creature and mooted experiments sourced from a forbidden book that was at the same time available in many editions and easily acquired—even the version required by students at Miskatonic University Medical School. The reporter repeated the information that 15 people, members of the local art community, had mysteriously disappeared, and that the man had purportedly witnessed some kind of awful celebration in which flesh was torn and devoured. He himself had barely escaped with his life.

Von found the TV station's phone number on his iPhone and called. They didn't have any more information than the report had given, but Von told them he had a sinking feeling about his girlfriend, Lydia X. Macabre.

"She hangs with those guys, yeah, the art punks. That neighborhood is pretty sketchy. She tried to get me to see some shows there, but the one thing I saw, some dude was eating a dead cat and vomiting it back up. Not quite my scene, you know? No wait, don't hang up. She's disappeared. I haven't heard from her, and I called the antique store she works at part-time and she hasn't come in. I'm afraid something has happened to her. Something connected with all this weirdness."

The reporter took Von's information and asked him to stay in touch.

Later that night, Von Hulking drove by Lydia's apartment. He buzzed her door several times and banged on it, to no avail. The mail slot was crammed and letters spilled out from under the door.

He was now convinced that there was a connection between her disappearance and that of the hipsters. But what was the missing link? If only he could get in touch with the man who'd seen it all go down. Johnny New One.

Von scratched his bald head. That was such a familiar name. But where had he heard it before? He suddenly recalled the context, and his face flushed with the memory. Ordinarily he didn't party, but there had been that one night, the specifics blurred but punctuated with imagery of hairy guys—'bears,' they had called themselves—and lots of nose candy. Von had been doing a heavy exercise regimen in preparation for the Mr. Pecs contest, and now that he'd taken home another trophy, he could afford to loosen up a little bit.

Johnny New One wasn't a bear, but he had buried himself in Von Hulking's mighty gluteal muscles, and the two had climaxed together not once, not twice, but three times in succession.

"And I'm not even gay," recalled Von Hulking. Still, he liked to think of himself as open-minded.

Von flicked through his saved phone numbers. Sure enough, there was a listing for a "Nu1." That had to be the guy.

"Yeah?" said a shaky voice on the other end.

"You don't know me, but my name is Von Hulking. We have to talk."

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A week later, Von Hulking was sitting in a lawn chair in his back yard when a miracle occurred: his stone angel began shedding tears of blood.

He and Johnny New One had spent the days in between talking, pooling information and planning. Lydia was still missing, the TV reporter had uncovered nothing new, and the two found themselves alone against a terrible menace, so strange and inscrutable they could barely discuss it between themselves. The terms "Nico Pussybat" and "spontaneous vaginal disembodiment" were not part of either's usual vocabulary.

"So, they're vampires," said Von Hulking on the third day, sometime in the late afternoon. The two had been gobbling their way through their combined drug hoards and were fairly disconnected from consensual reality. "How do you get rid of vampires?"

"Dude, they're not just ordinary vampires. They're genetically modified creatures of total darkness. I've been doing some research, but I keep coming up against this stone wall. People are either afraid to talk about it, or you and I have made ourselves victims of a shared delusion. It's been known to happen."

"All I know is this," said Von Hulking. "We have to fight them. In the movies, that means a cross, holy water, garlic. Not necessarily in that order."

"It can't hurt," said Johnny.

Thus it was that Von had experienced the miracle of the blood-weeping angel and had summoned the closest thing he could find to a priest: Father Fritter, an old half-blind schizophrenic who once played the part of a priest on reality TV.

"I'm pretty sure it's a miracle," said Von Hulking. "Look at all that blood flowing. It reminds me of the Mister Pecs contest back in '08, when I got hold of some bad juice and my six-pack exploded. Let me tell you, I was not bulking out for quite awhile. My recovery was long and painful."

Father Fritter squinted at the statue. "I may just be an old half-blind schizophrenic who once played the role of a defrocked priest on reality TV, but I'm pretty sure that's not an angel, Von. That's a lawn gnome. And somebody spilled ketchup on it. Period."



"It's a good thing for you I've got a strangulated hernia from working out or you'd be in for a world of pain, Father," said Von Hulking. "I hope you brought the rosary and the cross so we can get this blessing started."

"You're a fucking idiot," muttered Father Fritter.

"I hope you didn't mutter something that will earn your ass a world of pain," growled Von Hulking.

"I said, 'let's get on with it,'" said Father Fritter. He knelt before the lawn gnome and made the sign of the cross. "I hereby sanctify this bucket of water in the name of the most high. God, please charge this water with your wrath and vengeance so that my good friend Von here may wreak chaos and grim death upon the Vampussies. In the name of the big one, the little one and the misty one. Amen."

"Aren't you supposed to command it with the power of Christ?"

"That's an exorcism, you fool," said Father Fritter.

"Oh," said the bodybuilder. "Okay, you are dismissed."

"Where's the money?"

"It's a good thing I'm wearing a truss right now so my insides won't spill out, or I'd be wailing on your ass like Bob Marley. I thought you priests worked for the common good. Now you're asking for money?"

"Yeah well, like I said, I'm only a half-blind schizophrenic actor who once played the role of a defrocked priest on reality TV, so, some cash would be nice. Like maybe fifty bucks?"

"Look, the angel is bleeding again!" said Von Hulking.

Father Fritter sighed. "Twenty, but you're killing me here."

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Johnny gestured to the opening of the cave. "It's kind of dank and slimy in there, but they seem to like it."

"All right, I can take it from here," said Van Hulking, shouldering the Master Blaster.

"Be careful, man," said Johnny. "These aren't like ordinary vampires. They're Vampussy. A whole different breed. They'll take your eyeballs out and use them for marbles."

"I've done my homework," said Von Hulking. "I can handle myself." He closed the visor on the helmet and tapped at the glass with one gloved finger. "Let them try to pierce this special extra-heavy glass, 19 mm of protection. They'll be in for a world of pain."

"What?"

"Sorry, forgot to turn on my head mike." Von Hulking pressed a button and the outside speaker crackled to life. "I said, this is more than two feet of extra-heavy glass. Like wearing a thick glass rubber, but on your head."

"Remember—they suck anything and everything. Blood, jizz, lymph, snot, it's all the same. You can't just stroll in there with bravado and a heart full of vengeance."

"What about you? I thought were in this together, man!"

"I found their hideout, and I'll lay down a suppressing cover fire with the holy water, but I'm not going in there with you."

Von Hulking disappeared into the cave mouth. Five minutes later, the sound of screams, the flapping of leather wings, groans of agony and defiance and then an odd silence--followed by slushy submission--told Johnny everything he needed to know about their plan's outcome.

With a leaden heart, he dropped the Master Blaster squirt rifle on the ground and drove back to the city, chalking it all up to fate, kismet, karma and inevitability.

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“Zo, zat ees tha story of how I became a rehab kountsellor. Hart there any qvestions?”

The room was silent except for the occasional chair squeak.

“Yes, ees that your hand up I see?”

“Well,” said Lydia, “I think we’ve all learned a valuable lesson here. Don’t you think?” She looked around the room. Her brothers and sisters in recovery nodded, many of them sheathed in bandages and missing limbs, eyes and ears. “It’s said that an encounter with the shadow self means sacrifice of one kind or another, and those of us who don’t have physical wounds have sacrificed in other ways. We all bear scars on the inside.”

There was fervent agreement on this point.

“I think...” and her eyes began to well up. “I’m sorry, this is such an emotional subject for me. But I think we all deserve congratulations for making it this far. The road to recovery is long and painful, but, speaking just for myself, I feel optimistic. I think I’m going to make it. I think we’re all going to make it. And thanks to our wonderful leader, Dr. Nico Puzbat, we can see what comes after. It won’t be soft roses and plushy bears, but neither will it be night after night of blood orgies and dismemberment. Am I right?”

“Zank you, Lydia,” said Dr. Puzbat. “Defhinitally not plooshy bearz.”

“But what about relapses?” asked Von Hulking, who wore a full body cast.

“Eez ok to tek a leetle neep now and again,” said Dr. Puzbat. “Vee are only human. Vell, I personally am not, ha ha. But you know vat hi mean.”

Von looked deeply in Lydia’s eyes, and then down at her shoulder, where a fresh bite mark oozed. Lydia shyly dropped her eyes. The two held hands.

“Defhinitally not plooshy bearz!” repeated Dr. Puzbat to relieved laughter and applause.





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# SECOND CHURCH OF BAPHOMET

BY

RANDY CUNNINGHAM

“And I believe it could be, something good has begun.”

~Cat Stevens, “Peace Train” from the album *Teaser and the Firecat* (1971)

The inverted yellow pyramid and lowercase ‘i’, becoming the upright yellow pyramid with the exclamation point and flashing ‘caution’, and twirling back to an inverted pyramid with a lowercase ‘i’, is the last thing I see before the back of my head thumps the ceiling of my car. Of all days not to wear a fucking seatbelt.

I awaken. I see a small field, blowing leaves, and half naked trees--all upside down in a blurry red hue, through a spider web. I wipe the blood from beneath my brows with my fingertips and it trickles up my forehead into my receding hairline. The environment turns its natural greyish color, albeit still inverted. The spider web is actually cracked glass. My windshield.

My head pounds. My neck hurts. The back of my head is scrunched against the ceiling of my PT Cruiser that was evidently flipped over. Am I paralyzed? I attempt to will my right toes to wiggle. They wiggle. I sigh in relief and spit out a tooth.

I moan and shiver. It’s getting dark. Probably dusk.

What happened?

I was returning home from the hundred and twenty mile trek down to southern Illinois to attend a holomind meeting. I recall putting in the ZZ Top *Eliminator* CD. Pressing play.

I was driving, and remember thinking about my dented ‘magic donut,’ as I had jokingly referred to it at the underground meeting (dented from one of my hometown’s many potholes). Boonquar had laughed uproariously, but it was really not *that* funny. I’m in a time of dire financial hardship. My right rear tire blew out a couple months ago, and the donut served fine. I had driven with it for a couple months earlier this year as well, after my front driver’s side tire blew out (I’d subsequently gotten that one replaced by a nicer bald tire).

It was around four o’clock. The temperature was somewhere in the mid 50s, I’d guess, and to save on gas, I kept the heater off. I was chilly and had the collar of my brown leather blazer up to keep cold creeping death at bay as best I could. It was partly cloudy, a bit foggy and breezy. Sporadic pockets of recently departed leaves blew out onto the decrepit concrete road layed out before me. Only a few times through-out the day the sun had made its presence known, offering a sudden brief ray of cozy light before stepping behind the grey mass of sloth cloud again. It had not made an appearance in at least an hour, and would soon be turning in for good.

Gazing upon an open prairie of croaking cornstalks drifting by my left, I thought about my writing deadlines, and having to work full-time for just above minimum wage for the corporation on top of that just to barely scrape by. But why complain? My writing seemed to be starting to take off, maybe, finally. A handful of people were buying my books. And I had this short story to write for *Surreal Grotesque*. I allowed myself a moment to smile and reflect.

This year alone I have four limited edition chapbooks under my belt (one a rerelease)--all available for pre-order through the micropress Dynatox Ministries, which was founded by one of my favorite authors. You might have heard of him, depending on what you like to read, and if you are reading this story, I’d guess

there's a good chance you have. Jordan Krall has written several dark, bizarre, cryptic, squishy fictional works, including *Beyond the Valley of the Apocalypse Donkeys*, *Tentacle Death Trip*, *Penetralia*, *Nightmares From a Lovecraftian Mind*, and *Fistful of Feet*. Krall's writing has had a big influence on my own. But he's also been a source of inspiration as a person and a professional. He's one of the very few in the business supportive of my work and vision. Without his influence, I would not be writing this sentence.

Over the past year, since given the opportunity to write the *Pop Illuminati* volumes (a project that started out as a shorter, single non-fiction piece relating the Illuminati and New World Order conspiracy theory with pop culture) around September of last year, I've lived an entire life. I've been through some high highs, some pretty low lows, and several subtle shades of grey in between. I'd been through a couple strange liaisons, lost a couple jobs, entered lofty creative/mystical states, became depressed, was nearly evicted, met some interesting/colorful people both in person and online (as pixels/mental constructs), gotten kicked out of a bar or two, developed a new cosmological view of society and the world, etc., etc., etc., all of which have inspired or generated material for several more books: the two *Pop Illuminati* books (the second volume non yet complete), *Season of the New World Order: The Halloween 3-Illuminati Connection*, and more to come.

I barely got *Season of the New World Order: The Halloween 3-Illuminati Connection* finished in time for Halloween this year. I hope to write *An Illuminati X-Mas Carol* for Dynatox Ministries, to be released for Christmas this year. We'll see if I have time.

I threw my cigarette out the window, careful not to let it fly into the backseat, like in the movie *Planes Trains and Automobiles*. It was my last one. I cursed myself for not rolling more.

My writing has been my saving grace. It's helped me through some tough times, and has created some good times, even if only in my mind. One thing I've learned over the past year: women come and go, but my writing is always here. Were it not for my writing, my life would be meaningless.

I took in a deep breath, sighing, as ZZ Top's "Got Me Under Pressure" appropriately pounded from my trusty car speakers (the left one rattling a bit). I kept my speed at a comfortable 60mph. Even though I'd not seen another car for miles, I could not afford to get pulled over by some peckerhead in brown with a chip on his shoulder and itchy fine writing finger, concealed in a squad car behind a dying bush somewhere. You never know the sort of hick/hillbilly/redneck hybrid trooper you'll get in southern Illinois. Plus I did not want to run out the luck of the 'magic donut.' (I thought of Boonquar's goofy laugh, with his pencil thin moustache, pointed eyebrows, and stonewashed denim jacket. I think he's a queer.).

Without the aid of mile markers on this off-road (the only one on the map I'd found that was not undergoing road construction), I estimated by the digital clock on my in dash and my odometer how much closer I was to returning to my hometown, closer north. I had at least a couple hours drive at this pace. Catching my eye in the rearview mirror were dull headlights emerging from the grey fog.

I checked my speedometer. I was doing fifty. After breaking for a black cat a few miles back, I had not yet reset the cruise control. I didn't like to use the cruise control, anyway. It made me feel like I'd just given a bit of my own control over to a machine. But today I tried to utilize it as my right foot was starting to feel gouty.

I sipped the 33oz fountain pop of *Mountain Dew* I'd bought at the *Mach1* station before I left the town where the meeting took place. The ice was melted and I wished there was a service station on this road to get another pop. The headlights were the shape of reptile eyes. They darted toward the rear of my car, and proceeded to ride my ass.

I intentionally slowed down even more so the driver could pass. Without flashing a signal, the driver made the move to pass me. In the thin fog, there was probably little danger of the car having a head-on collision with a vehicle coming in the other lane. This car was the first I'd seen on the road in over an hour.

I glanced at the passing car. It was dark blue. And big. A Sedan, perhaps. All the windows were tinted. It slowed to my pace, keeping even for several seconds, before bolting onward and past me. It remained in the opposite lane even when well out beyond the front of my car, and I noticed a black bumper sticker that stated in white letters: 'Baby Onboard'. Next to it, an instant before the word could no longer be registered within my range of sight, I read the personalized license plate--'WINK'. The car was then lost to the fog of the other lane.

I faced my own lane and saw the yellow triangle shaped metal 'caution' sign with the large exclamation



point and the two flashing road construction barricades, about twenty yards directly ahead. I slammed on my breaks and the left rear side of my Cruiser buckled. Before swerving and crashing through the barricade on the right, I saw the mangled ‘magic donut’ roll out before me on the road.

That’s what happened.

I allow my inverted body to drop onto my crushed ceiling. I sit upright, upon my ceiling, and hear the crunch of broken glass beneath me. Bits of it pierce my ass cheeks, but I’m more concerned about my throbbing head. I feel my face with my hand. It’s wet and lumpy. I scrape my finger. I feel my glasses dangling over my chin and I slip them on. The frames are bent, but the lenses are intact and not cracked. Looking down at my body, I see that my blazer is smeared in blood.

Or blood mixed with *Mountain Dew*. The cracked review mirror lies next to the crushed fountain drink cup with the *Mach 1* Saturn ring logo. I lift it up to my face in my trembling hand. Holding it as steady as possible in both my hands, the cracks of the mirror could not have made my face appear worse.

My nose is flattened, and both my lips are split open. A large shard of broken window glass is embedded diagonally through the center of my forehead. The wound is about two and a half inches long, and hard telling how deep. Blood steadily pours from it--crimson streams snaking past bits of broken glass stuck in my cheeks. I see the dawning horror in my right eye, the left one completely gone.

Just a tattered, shredded eyelid, flapping serenely in the breeze.

I drop the mirror and let out a scream.

I crawl from the interior of my car and climb to my feet. The car is totaled. I don’t see the donut. I’m at least thirty feet from the ditch next to the road. Were my cellphone on me (it’s out of minutes), I might call 911. I step on something. Looking down, I see my black Pacer’s cap wadded under my foot. Bracing myself, I lean down, and then slip it on my head backwards so that the brim doesn’t disturb the shard of glass stuck in my forehead.

There’s got to be a farmhouse somewhere close. I hear music and turn to face the woods. Feeling a bit giddy, but not really in great pain any longer (but knowing I should surely fall dead at any moment) I stagger in the direction of the trees half dressed in leaves, in search of the music’s source.

My gout flairs up suddenly and sharply in my right ankle as I limp through the darkening woods through scattered leaves and dying brush. The tall and narrow black trees pose grotesquely against a stark grey cloudy backdrop. The music becomes clearer and more audible. It’s a song I know. Slow, bluesy, atmospheric. It’s ZZ Top’s ‘2000 Blues’. It’s not one typically played on the radio, no matter how cool a rock station. Someone apparently owns the *Recycler* album.

I happen upon a small clearing. It’s a yard with half-dead grass two feet high in most areas, arching over a stone pathway that winds several dozen feet to a ramshackle shack. The shadows of the blades of grass are ghastly jagged ink blotches on the dusty stones.

I limp from stone to stone and then up the rickety porch steps as Billy Gibbons croons the line, “...and set the count down, for 2000 blues.” I knock on the front door hanging from a hinge.

The music stops.

“Come in,” hollars a croaking, garbled voice.

I pull on the door and it drops to the porch as I step back. Dust flies up in my face. I cough. Then I enter.

I’m standing in a small living room. The smell of cat piss, rotten fish, and shit intrudes my nasal cavity. The place is dirty. Flies buzz everywhere. It’s cluttered. Knick-knacks and trash litter the floor and furniture. The room is dim. A small television set with rabbit ear antennae sits upon a wicker clothes hamper. The sound is muted. The show on the screen keeps fuzzing in and out, periodically disrupted by total black and white static. The actor is Donald Sutherland. He’s legless and crying, lying on his belly in a room containing only a stepladder.

“That’s fucked up,” I say. I look to my right. Beneath the dull light shown through the grubby window (no indoor light appears to be turned on), I see two greyish, boney, wrinkly, lumpy calves with thick varicose veins and black fluffy house slippers rested upon a foot stool. The rest of the legs are covered by what looks like a black silky night gown. I don’t see the rest of the figure wearing the gown as a big ugly lamp shade blocks us.

"I got into a wreck. I'm dying," I say. I look over at the old-fashioned jukebox in the corner of the room. The arched top of it is grimy and the transparent front surface is smeared swirly-like in what appears to be feces. "Was the music playing from that jukebox?"

"Come around here, lemme' see ya," croaks the garbled voice.

I limp slowly around the back of a tattered loveseat until I see the woman with her legs propped up, sitting in an easy chair. The black gown is parted at her chest. I see the tops of two wrinkled, grey, varicose veined titties before they part separate ways behind the 'v' formed opening of the silky gown.

More disheartening is the woman's face. Perched upon a freakishly long neck that couldn't be more than four inches in circumference is a sight I wouldn't wish on the nightmares of my worst enemies.

Her grey chin is narrow, a foot long, and curls out in two waffle sized loops. It's essentially a small spiral jutting from the bottom of her face. Her nose looks as if it was hit by a wrecking ball from the side--the left side lying across her sunken in cheek. The skin on her face sags to the point that it might at any time just slide off. One of her eyes is too far down on her face, right in the middle of her cheek--as if it were once in the proper spot but over an indeterminable time drifted downward with the 'melting skin.' The eye is big and round and bloodshot and watery. Her other eye appears to be in the appropriate place on her face, but is not an eye. It's a large toadstool growing from an eye socket.

"You look horrible," she says. "Sit down." The hair on her head looks like a tumbleweed that's burnt to a crisp.

I plop down on the love seat. I notice a crumpled, flattened potato chip bag lying on the floor in the corner. The sun that is supposed to be a potato peeks out at me from behind the word '*Lays*'.

"Wanna lick my calves?" the wretched woman growls.

I shake my head. "No."

"Then let's go to church."

"I need a doctor."

"We all need a lotta things."

"I could die."

"There's a doctor at church, probably."

"You have a car?"

"We'll take the canoe."

I shake my head. "There a stream?"

"By the dock." Her long gnarled grey finger points at the window, the sleeve of her gown drooping very loosely from her frail skinny wrist.

Through the grimy window, I see silhouettes of skimpy narrow trees in grotesque sexual positions.

We go outside. It's getting dark. I check my watch. The face is busted. The hands are stuck at 4:20. She leads me through a trail in the woods behind the shack. Her black gown drags on the leafy ground behind her. She appears to be gliding. The trees are dense. A large snake drops above the wretched woman, dangling from a tree branch, hissing at me. I stop and gasp.

The wretched woman reaches up and clenches the snake by its throat. The reptile goes limp and she lets go. The snake slides down her arm and black cloaked body, landing in the leaves. The wretched woman lets out a soft clear chuckle that sounds like it came from a much prettier, more youthful woman's mouth.

In what's seemed like an hour we reach a small clearing. It's night. A large grey canoe is tied to a small rickety dock in the brush.

She turns to me. Her gown is opened down the center, exposing her well defined ribs and grey concave belly (I still can't see her nipples). Below this, her bush is a grey and black tangled, matted mess. There's a *Froot Loop* stuck in it.

"Let's go," she croaks, and lifts up a big brown paddle from inside the canoe. The long handle portion of the paddle is sculpted in the design of a double-helix of two serpents. Their wooden heads part at the head of the handle, creating a 'v' shape.

"She might get out a night stick. And hurt me real real bad. By the road side, in the ditch."

~ZZ Top, "Got Me Under Pressure", from the album *Eliminator* (1983)

We float downstream in the canoe, I on one end, this mysterious woman on the other, facing me. I notice the tip of her coiled chin is shaped like a penis head. It even has a dimple, appearing as a urinal hole. She alone paddles (I didn't even see another paddle). Thickets of dried-out weeds jut up from beneath the slow flowing water. The river couldn't be more than three canoe lengths across. The murky water has a silvery blue luster. The dense trees loom above us on either side of the stream. The only sky that is visible is above these trees. A few grey clouds sit in the otherwise starlit sky. The lines of tree tops, when following them downstream with my eyes, enclose the sky in a 'v', converging at a large blue and silvery full moon. From my point of view, the moon appears propped a foot above my wretched companion's head.

Her crisp tumbleweed hair is only slightly affected by the gentle breeze. Occasionally, the wind carries the scent of rotting meat from her end of the canoe over into to mine. I must be chilly, as I'm shivering. I notice my physical pain has subsided to the point I can hardly feel it.

I hear crickets. Hidden amphibians greet us on our journey with sporadic croaks. My gruesome companion paddles laxly and gracefully. She's wheezing a bit. Her movements betray her elderly physical appearance. If I had to go by her agility alone, I'd say she was a woman in her mid twenties. Her large watery, blood shot 'cheek eye' peers wistfully around at our snug surroundings. I can't register the color of it, exactly, as each time I come close to looking into her eye, I'm sucked in. My entire being is whisked into her pupil, descending through a violent maelstrom leading to a watery grave. I can't break the eye contact until she looks away. And then I'm back in my seat in the canoe.

We pass a jagged wood plank floating on the water. It seems to be part of a sign, broken off. It says, "Second Church of Bap--" before it's split off. Then we pass my dinted "magic donut," also floating on the river.

Flocks of crows flap in from the 'v' shaped skyline, clothing the trees.

"My dogs are barkin'," says the wretched woman, removing her fluffy slippers and resting her big gangrenous feet upon the seat at the center of the canoe. They smell as one might expect. "Why doncha rub 'em?"

"Man..." I cup my hand over my smashed nose.

Small red ants march up the stem of the toadstool projecting from her eye socket and congregate at the top. I start vomiting over the side of the canoe. The woman barks an uproarious gravelly laugh. When I'm finished, I look up and she's grinning. Her teeth are half black and rotting. A couple fall out.

I divert my gaze to the full moon above her head. "The moon's gorgeous tonight."

"Watch." She extends a boney arm above her head and her knobby fingers curl and fold to form a silhouette of a straggly wolf's head, against the full moon background--almost like a shadow puppet. "Hooowwwl!" she croaks, opening the blackened snout. She lowers her arm and chuckles.

It's a smooth, carefree, warm chuckle, and her teeth are perfect and gleaming white. Her face is no longer disfigured.

She's divinely gorgeous. Her sepia skin is radiant and smooth. Her big brown, twinkling eyes are where they should be--lined below her forehead, beneath high-set arched dark brows. Her nose is slightly big, and narrow, but ordinary, and not broken. Healthy cheeks curve out below prominent cheek bones. Full, red natural lips pout above a small chin.

Upon her dark, long coiled locks of hair sits a large curling golden headdress. It's overwrought with shimmering jewels and gems.

Her long gown is sheening white. She has four arms--two on the left and two on the right. The two lower arms maneuver the paddle, with the same strength and grace displayed by the wretched woman who this woman displaced. In her right upper arm she holds a rosary, and in her left upper arm she clutches a book. Zeroing in, between her lovely fingers I see most of the lettering on the cover. It's one I've been working on for the past year: *Pop Illuminati Volume Two: The Cosmic Yin Yang Holomind*.

"My book."

She smiles warmly. "It's complete. Here." She hands it over to me and I stuff it down the front of my

pants, soaked in blood.

Scattered about us on the water are dozens of lotus flowers. From the center of each projects a fully bloomed pot plant spotted with a purple feline eye pattern.

“Take insurance in the shade of green.”

~ZZ Top, “Dusted,” from the album *Mescalero* (2003)

I look up at my beautiful companion.

“Care to partake?” she smiles.

“Ok,” I say.

Still rowing the canoe, she sets the rosary down, reaches over and plucks a plant from the center of a lotus flower. She breaks it down and stuffs the pieces into a large golden pipe. Striking a match and lighting the pipe, she sucks in deeply, holding the smoke for about ten seconds before exhaling a large plume of purple glitter. My goddess passes me the bowl.

I hit, hold it, and blow it out, coughing a bit.

She chuckles.

“How much further?” I ask.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” she says. “I could listen to your syntax all night. I love it.”

One of the crows flaps between us, then decays in mid air. It turns stiff and drops dead upon the center seat of the canoe. One of its eyes pops from the socket. Several maggots follow.

“I love yours,” I say.

Hanging around her neck, above her healthy cleavage is a gold/orange medallion of the sun. Gold bracelets adorned with a plethora of gems and stones coil each of her four forearms.

She rests her heels on the middle seat of the canoe. Her coiled anklets match her bracelets. Her feet are beautiful and smell of lilac.

“Go ahead,” she says. “It’s okay.”

I clasp her left foot in my hands. It’s very soft. I start messaging. She closes her eyes and her head drops back. She moans gently.

She extends her lovely hands above her head and creates a ‘shadow puppet’ of a dove, soaring against the gleaming full moon. She chuckles softly. The silhouette of a straggly wolf’s head pops up, snarling, and mauls the dove.

I avert my gaze down to the wretched woman, sitting where the goddess had been. The goddess is no longer in sight. Feeling the boney chilled foot clasped in my palms and fingers, I yank my hands away, gasping and choking. The wretched woman laughs uproariously. Lying against her grey chest skin is a necklace strung with several shrunken heads. I recognize one of them as mine.

Her black cloak falls further open down the front, and one of her sagging breasts is in full view. The nipple is a piece of mold. It turns to perky brown nipple, the areola the size of a half dollar, rested upon a large globe of sepia colored breast. I look up at the face of the beautiful goddess again. She laughs affably. My heart and loins leap in tandem.

“Don’t leave me again,” I plead.

Her face turns compassionate. “You know I haven’t.”

I look down at the blade of the paddle, the corner rested upon the water, creating a small swirl in the stream. The swirl becomes a spinning wheel, and then another wheel appears next to it. They are joined by a moving coupling rod. They are locomotive wheels. They disappear as she lifts the paddle from the water.

The paddle is suddenly a musical instrument. I’ve seen it in books. It’s called a vina, played in ancient India. The goddess plucks the four strings of the instrument’s neck with her lower left hand and the three strings on the side with her lower right hand. I recognize the melody. She starts singing, in a majestic alto voice, Cat Stevens’ “Peace Train,” as we continue down the stream.

“Oh I’ve been smiling lately,” she sings, “dreamin’ about the world as one. And I believe it could be, some day it’s going to come.”

The hidden frogs and toads croak the beat to the music.

Looking to my right, we pass a man in a business suit, hidden between two thickets, beating bongos. It's Colin Powell, the former Secretary of State under President George W. Bush.

The goddess continues singing the song. Her face becomes the wretched woman's, who croons in a soulful baritone: "*'Cause out on the edge of darkness, there lies the peace train. Oh peace train take this country, come take me home again.*"

As the song proceeds, the performer changes several times from the goddess to the wretched woman, and back, as they alternate lines.

The goddess's eyes mist, as she sings: "*Now I've been crying lately. Thinkin' about the world as it is! Why must we go on hating? Why can't we live in this?*"

The wretched woman sings: "*Yes Peace Train holy rollin', everyone look for the Peace Train.*"

The goddess's face is superimposed on the wretched woman's face, as they sing in harmony: "*And it's getting nearer. Soon it will all be true.*"

As the song ends, the canoe is suddenly whisked through a side channel and we glide rapidly and violently, the water turning tumultuous. I clench the sides of the boat as the wretched woman laughs. We're spit onto a large open murky pond and slow down considerably. The wretched woman maneuvers us in the direction of a marsh land about thirty yards away. Sitting on the marsh is a white two story building, with two gables constructed side by side making up the top portion of it. The front of the building is flat and the structure appears well maintained. Beneath the glow of the moon, I see that the yard is filled with flowers of various exotic plants and flowers. As we float nearer, I see a little girl in a sun dress playing with a peacock. The peacock, its fan of gaudy feathers fully expanded, chases her about as she laughs. The adorable girl sees us and waves, smiling. I wave back.

"Is that the church?" I look up at the wretched woman.

She ignores me and continues paddling. We drift by the building, and as we pass it, instead of seeing the side of it, the building becomes paper thin. And then the inverse side of the building comes into view. It appears just like the other 'front' side, but is black and drab. Shingles and rotted planks of siding dangle from it. Withered vines cling to its surface, and instead of a garden of flowers, the yard overflows weeds.

A stocky hunchbacked figure in a dark cloak and hood yanks on a rope beneath a large bell cracked down the center, hanging from a decrepit tower in the yard. It dully rings out several times. He turns to us, sneering. Half his face is moss. The other half I recognize from the popular media. The man who rang the bell is the conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh.

We dock at a small rickety dock. I look across the pond, and on the embankment, several dozen yards away, a small group of people watch us, half obscured by the brush. One holds a movie clapper board, and another holds a movie camera. The third guy who is wearing a white cap looks very familiar, I think, as I cup the side of my cheek with my palm. The three men duck behind the weeds.

The wretched woman and I step out of the canoe and ascend the small slope of hill, through weeds. A few cars are parked in the small parking lot positioned to the left of the building. A few more cars pull in. A dark sedan with tinted windows and a front license plate that says 'WINK' parks and a man with slicked back hair and wearing sunglasses and a black suit steps out of the drivers side. He glances at me and smirks. Then he opens one of the rear doors of the car. Stepping out of the backseat is an attractive young woman with brown hair, wearing a red and orange paisley shawl. She looks terrified. In her arms she holds an infant wrapped in a quilt. The driver takes the crying child from her and she covers her eyes, sobbing.

An older woman with a peacock feather sticking out of her hat, steps out of the passenger side door and scrambles around the sedan and embraces the young woman, consoling her.

People dressed mostly in fancy black clothes pour from their cars, walking through the weeds to the small porch and entering the front door, making idle chat.

"Someone could drive me to the hospital," I say to the wretched woman.

She turns to me. "After the service."

The shutters spring open on the window below the left gable. A boy about five years old leans over a



small balcony. He's clad in black with his arms spread in a sheening black cape. He dons a grey furry mask, covering the top half of his face. The nose of the mask is a stubby snout. He mocks a loud squeak, and a few of the church goers below chuckle.

The wretched woman points up at him and laughs. "It's the bat boy."

We walk by a decrepit wooden sign sticking up from the ground. Most of it has been broken off. The faded letters read: "--homet." We walk up the few front porch steps. I look up at a shredded, tattered American flag hanging from a short pole jutting from the side of the building, fluttering in the breeze. A tall gaunt man in a dark suit greets us at the door. I recognize him immediately. He's John Kerry, the current Secretary of State under President Obama.

He looks down at me. "Welcome." He smiles broadly, his left eye drenched in blood. "There's a seat for you at the front."

I wince and nod, taking note of the silver pentagram pendant dangling over his chest.

The wretched woman guides me down the center aisle of several rows of pews. The flat carpeting is red. Looking about--the interior is long and narrow. I don't see any windows. The walls on either side of us are completely draped with dingy, black tapestries and curtains. The ceiling is shaped like a 'M', congruent with the two gables comprising the top of the building as seen from outside. Each of the two triangular 'arches' comprising this ceiling extends about fifty feet high before being completely lost in shadow (The gables from the outside view of the house did not look this high at all) and are plastered black with scattered white vertical, jagged streaks. The low hanging, center ridge of the 'M' is perfectly aligned with the center aisle of red floor separating the pews.

Hundreds of large and small lighted candles adorn the place.

"This has to be a fire hazard," I comment to my wretched companion as she guides me to the front pew on the left where we sit down.

Before us is a stage connected to the back, black tapestried wall of the establishment. It has a black velvety floor and sets about three feet high. At the center of this stage hangs an inverted, wooden cross, about the size of a dwarf. The cross is connected to a post that extends upward to the center ridge of the 'M' shaped ceiling.

I look behind us. About forty other people are dispersed in the other pews. It would likely take at least another forty people to fill the pews completely. I see a small rickety balcony below the window where 'the bat boy' must have been. The shutters are now shut, and I don't see the bat boy. Below the balcony, John Kerry shuts the front door as the final disciple arrives and sits. I see the young woman in the orange and brown paisley shawl. She doesn't have her baby. Her eyes are puffy. She looks sad. The older woman with the peacock feather extending from her hat who consoled her earlier sits next to her. Her face appears stoic. Most of the faces here are stoic.

Upon the stage, Rush Limbaugh waddles about drooling and lighting more candles, including a large floor-standing candelabra near the back curtained wall. He turns to me and grins. He's missing teeth. A mealworm is clutched to the moss that covers the left half of his face. He returns to his work.

John Kerry steps up and strides up to a podium at the right front area of the stage.

"Converts. Welcome," he addresses the crowd. "Welcome," looking at me.

Rush waddles toward the front edge of the stage, about to step off. He trips and tumbles off the stage. A few in attendance chuckle. He's sprawled out on his back on the narrow strip of red carpeted floor that separates the front row of pews from the stage. Sitting up, he lifts a rotted banana peel from his side.

"Damn bat boy," he scowls, his head wobbling about on his shoulders, and then he drops on his back. The congregation howls in laughter. They quiet down, and a big lump beneath the black tapestries zips diagonally across the length of one of the side walls, giggling in a little boy's voice.

I look up at the wretched woman sitting next me. "I'm no convert."

"Shhh." She turns to me, raising a boney finger to her cracked lips, nearly putting my eye out with the point of her curly chin.

"Happy Veterans' Day," John Kerry mockingly stifles a laughter, and the crowd laughs. A red tear drops from his blood soaked eye. "Let's have a warm hand for Pastor Samuel." He looks to his right, clapping and

grinning.

From stage left, a tall looming figure steps out from behind a black curtain. I notice by the red bow tie, blue overcoat, white shirt, and red and blue top hat with a white star in the center that he's dressed like Uncle Sam. His humongous stacked shoes make him appear over nine feet tall.

He faces the congregation. He raises his right hand and makes the devil horn gesture (his two middle fingers folded down) and makes the same hand sign with his left hand hanging down at his side, palm side up. His face is odd. It's in the likeness of the Uncle Sam character, but the right side of his face is real and the left half appears to be a latex mask. The long white goatee that hangs from his mask is blended with the chin hair of the real half of his face. True to the popular Uncle Sam form, he dons no moustache. His mask eyebrow and real eyebrow are thick, bushy and white (the mask one not quite as thick and having a bit of grey). His piercing aqua blue eyes dart excitedly about the place, as he casually walks stone-faced up to the same podium where John Kerry had been.

In a loud husky voice, Pastor Samuel says, "Happy Sunday. Hail Lucifer, fuck Jesus."

"Hail Lucifer, fuck Jesus," the attendees in the pews echo dully in unison.

"Evil for evil's sake," he says.

"Evil for evil's sake," they say.

"For the Light beyond all good and evil."

"Glory be to Baphomet," they say.

"Glory be to the Grey," he says, and he looks at me a moment. "Bring out the fucking dogs." He looks to his left. John Kerry and Rush Limbaugh step up onto the stage, each holding a leash. Each leash connects to the studded collar of two separate men, both crawling out onto the stage on their hands and knees. They look dirty, shirtless and lean. One wears camouflage pants while the other wears filthy, white brief underwear. Dog tags hang down from their necks. Both soldiers look exhausted and sickly.

A man in the back corner of the stage is playing an antique looking pipe organ. The slow, sad chord progression is loud, dull, and jarring. The grinning, overweight man in the glittery silver jumpsuit playing it looks strangely familiar. He almost looks like a caricature of someone...I nail it. The dark shades and the bulbous, swelling purple nose the size of a plum threw me off. The cat playing the organ is former president of the United States Bill Clinton.

Taunting them with whips, Kerry and Limbaugh force the two veterans to fold flags. So they crawl around, appearing dehydrated, folding six in all. They fold all six American flags in a triangular shapes. They lay all six folded flags upon the stage, either bottom corner of each folded flag touching a bottom corner of another flag, creating the shape of a hexagram upon the stage floor. The inverted wooden cross hangs about three feet above the shape's center.

Bill Clinton stops playing the organ and picks his nose. He look directly at me and sticks his tongue out.

John Kerry tosses a banjo up to Pastor Samuel, who starts performing a grotesque rendition of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy', prancing frenetically about on the stage. A pointed, grey furry tail swishes about on the stage floor below his blue coat-tails. Clinton pounds a shrieking accompaniment. At the song's close, the pastor pulls out a box cutter, the latex side of his mouth now suddenly grinning (the real half of his mouth twitching angrily).

"Fuckin' jarhead," the pastor says. He runs over and cuts one of the soldiers along the side of the head with the stubby blade. Blood seeps from the long slice, down the soldier's ear. He clasps the side his head, crying out. The congregation howls with laughter.

Out of nowhere, the bat boy runs up on stage and starts gnawing on the other soldier's ear. He bites a piece off, blood trailing down the soldier's jaw. The man falls over on his side, clasp his ear, screaming. Some of the congregation laughs, while others scream. A fat woman in a fancy black hat and a black and white polkadotted dress runs up, smirking, and grabs hold of the bat boy. She carries the shrieking child off the stage, shaking her head.

"Enough," says Pastor Samuel, and the congregation stops laughing. Rush and Kerry walk the soldiers off the stage by their leashes.

Rush Limbaugh wheels out onto the stage a large boxed television set with rabbit-eared antennae on a

large metal cart, stopping close to the circle of triangular flags. Pastor Samuel pulls out a remote and points it at the VCR set beneath the television set. On the TV screen, something is rewinding, then the action pauses. John Kerry's frozen face is on the TV screen. He's wearing a chef's hat. Neither of his eyes is blood drenched.

"Recall this from last week?" says Pastor Samuel, looking over at John Kerry standing on the left side of the stage. Kerry's face is beet red. The pastor presses 'play' on the remote and on the television screen John Kerry stands before a stove on the stage in what appears to be the very same church we are all now gathered in.

"Today....for church....we're making 'Lucifer Lentils'," says John Kerry on the TV. "I think we'll all like...Baphomet should like..." he says timidly, stirring a large pot on the burner. "It's very nourishing and enlighten---" From behind him, Pastor Samuel runs up with an axe raised--shrieking--and strikes it through the top of John Kerry's head. Kerry falls forward, screaming, as the handle of his wooden mixing spoon goes through his eye.

I look around at the congregation, sitting in the pews, pointing and laughing at the TV screen. I look at John Kerry. He chuckles--stifling anger--and points at his blood soaked eye.

Pastor Samuel points the clicker at the TV again. "And now in real time....From the First Church of Baphomet in New York City...."

Reverend Al Sharpton is now on the TV screen, a pick stuck in his hair. He's wearing an orange pin striped suit and a large gold chain hangs over his chest. Three gorgeous big boobed naked ladies nuzzle about him...a redhead, a brunette, and a black chick. All three women are centipede from the waste down. Two of the centipede lower halves dance and scuttle about on the black stage and the brunette's segmented insect section curls over Sharpton's shoulders. The redheaded half-centipede woman gives the reverend head. Behind the four of them hangs an inverted wooden cross lined with golden bristles.

"What up my niggas over there in the second class church," Sharpton grunts.

"What up, my nigga," shouts Bill Clinton.

Reverend Sharpton shakes his head. Clears his throat. "Here go today's message from the Anti-Christ." He moans, eyes rolling about. "The f-fools are buying and buying into Obam...ahhhhh...care." The redhead runs the back of her hand across her lips. Sharpton snorts a line of cocaine off the black chick's tits, bunched together in the palms of her hands.

"We got them bastards by the ball sack," Sharpton informs us, eyes bulged, fist clenched. "Today President Obama, AKA Osama Bin Laden, AKA Dam---" The screen turns to static.

"Wheel it out, fatty," says Pastor Samuel.

Rush Limbaugh wheels the metal cart holding the TV off the stage.

"Time to conjure some mojo, like a mofo," says the pastor, the white star at the center of his hat now inverted. "Bring up the offering."

The driver of the Sedan steps onto the stage, holding a wadded up blanket containing a child. I look over at the young brunette in the orange and brown paisley shawl as she screams out: "No!!" The older lady with the feather in her cap holds onto her, and the young woman struggles, screaming. She shoves the older woman onto the floor behind the pew. John Kerry darts down the aisle and punches the young woman in the back of the head. She stumbles. He grabs her by the back of her hair and forces her into her seat. He sits next to her, gripping her tightly so she can't move. He grins, glancing about.

The Sedan driver hands the naked boy over to Rush Limbaugh. The driver places a humongous empty fish bowl directly beneath the inverted cross on the stage floor, within the center of the hexagram composed of folded American flags. The bawling infant dangles upside down, gripped by his ankles in Rush's fist. Limbaugh positions the child against the cross. Pastor Samuel positions the point of a small metal spike against one of the child's ankles, above Limbaugh's hand. The pastor pounds the head of the spike with a large mallet, and the spike punctures the ankle. Blood spurts over the front couple rows of pews. The infant screams.

I stand and shout, "Stop!" as the pastor hits the spike again. The wretched woman leaps from her seat and grabs me and trips me to the floor in the center aisle. She presses her gangrenous foot down on the center of my chest, glaring down at me. I'm sucked spinning through the vortex in the pupil of her 'cheek eye'. I'm locked in a rotted wooden crate at the bottom of the sea. In the crate is an opened clamshell, housing an orange and brown shrimp that's curled about a glowing sepia pearl.

I smell lilac and in the dimness feel the breath of the Goddess whisper: "Let's fuck." I can't see her as her moist lips kiss mine. I taste her rotted tongue, and squirming maggots fill my mouth. I'm sucked back into the church, and stare up at the wretched woman, her lumpy cold heel buried into my breastbone.

"Bitch!" I cough out maggots.

She laughs. She pulls aside a curtain on the wall, revealing a window through which I see the waning crescent moon hanging in the dark sky. She cups her fingers over her mouth, cackling childishly.

I'm hanging upside down, on the stage, looking out at the people in pews staring up at me in perverse anticipation. Then from the floor, I look up on the stage at the screaming child hanging upside down by impaled ankles on the inverted cross. Rush holds the kid's wrists against the horizontal plank of the cross. Pastor Samuel grabs two more spikes and hammers them through the kid's palms.

The pastor drags the blade of his box cutter across the child's throat. A sheet of blood pours down the boy's gurgling mouth and over his forehead, landing in the giant fish bowl.

Rush starts crying. And then, appearing perplexed, he suddenly smiles. Then he starts laughing. The bowl fills half red, and from a black altar the Pastor produces a large golden chalice. He dips it in the bowl and takes a drink, blood leaking down his goatee. He guzzles it, and a look of supreme satisfaction flashes upon both the real and latex sides of his face. He lets out a long belch. "Kick fucking ass!"

The folks in the pews raise their 'horned' fists in the air, yelling "Yeah!"

"Congregation...Partake of the terror blood!" says Pastor Samuel, and a couple of young women in black dresses depart from the pews and step timidly up unto the stage. Pastor Samuel dips the chalice and gives them both a sip. Their faces look excited. Then deranged. Gazing upon the congregation, the two women's faces turn green. Their eyes roll to the back of their heads, showing only the whites. They make hideous, grimacing faces, shrieking and howling in strange tongues. They rip their clothes off.

They drop to the floor, twisting and contorting their thin green bodies in all sorts of implausible shapes. They're once in a double pretzel shape, and then they both start crawling around on the stage, bent back on their fingertips, their bellies and perky breasts aimed at the 'M' shaped ceiling. They continue this 'spider-walk' up the tapestried walls, and up into the flickering double temples of the 'M' shaped plastered ceiling, shrieking, and lost to darkness, emerging a moment later, descending the white streaked ceiling slopes like large green spiders.

Shadows of unseen presences flit across the dimly lighted black interior of the church, snuffing out some of the candles. The faces of the congregation express panic, terror, and dread.

"For the land of the meek, and the home of the slave, the time is nigh for the cosmic awakening!" the horned pastor who had just been wearing the 'Uncle Sam' top hat screeches, his clawed grey furry hands stretched upward in a 'v'.

The next moment everyone is fucking everybody....even people who appear they might be related, like mother and son and so forth. People bent over pews, grinding and screaming in pain and terror. People sixty-nining. People doing three-ways, four-ways, five-ways....People slapping each other. And hocking on one another. The fat woman in black and white polka dots has her dress hiked up as she squats over a young Pilipino man. A long turd hangs ready to drop in his willing, wide opened mouth. Over in the corner, two older gentlemen--one wearing a monocle--rub erect cocks together while french kissing. Upon the stage the two possessed ladies do the 'scissors', moaning, their naked bodies smeared in swirly red.

"You go mad here," Pastor Samuel says, his eyes now two burning flames in hollowed sockets.

I pull out from my blazer a pocket notebook and pen to jot notes.

"What's that?" croaks the wretched woman.

"An idea for *The Illuminati X-mas Carol*," I say.

"Put it away," she says. "We're in church." A small fork tongue juts from the 'urinal hole' of her chin, wiggling, then goes back in.

I shove the notebook and pen back into my pocket.

The two possessed women devour the remains of the crucified boy.

I look up at the bat boy, sitting in a pew. He's now a real bat. His radiant red eyes glare at me and he bares his fangs. He looks up behind him, then flaps into the air in the direction of the balcony above the front

door entrance of the church, where Rush Limbaugh stands with his plump penis out, masterbating. The greyish bat boy latches onto Rush's face with its fangs and claws. Limbaugh shrieks and struggles. The furry bat boy rips the skin and moss from Rush's face, revealing the bloody fat and sinew, and then flaps away, squeaking, over the congregation---many of whom point up at Rush, laughing hysterically.

Rush's bloody head wobbles on its shoulders. "Damn bat boy," he says, and drops from the balcony, landing behind the last row of pews. More people laugh.

"Hey! New fella!" Pastor Samuel jumps from the stage, into the aisle, standing next to where I lie captive. He squats and holds out the golden chalice. "Partake of the blood, sonny." He starts crying. "Do it," he pleads.

"I'll fucking pass," I yell.

"You won't have time to write your Christmas Carol, sonny," the pastor says with sad yellow goat eyes. "Maybe if there's a Christmas next year...." he smirks. He pushes the lip of the cup to my sealed lips. Over his shoulder, I watch the wretched woman extend her delicate sepia wrist, pick up a candle, and toss it at a tapestry, which ignites. In seconds the fire spreads to the whole back wall of the church.

I snap the wretched woman's ankle in my hands. She screams and drops to the floor. I run down the center aisle, but people are piled up at the front door, clawing and biting one another. I smell burning flesh as the church fills with smoke.

Before vanishing behind a couple black drapes on the wall, Pastor Samuel pokes his long snouted face out from between them and says this to the congregation: "I'll miss you guys." Tears dampen the grey fur below his eyes. The curtains shut over his face.

"There's no hope," I say to myself.

"Hey man!"

I look to my right. A shadow of what appears to be a very tall *Mickey Mouse* stands in the smoke. It pulls aside a portion of tapestry. The triangular opening shows outside. "Through here, foo," the shadow says.

I'm reluctant. "I wanted to love her."

"It just be a change of mind. *Pop II* where it at, Jack."

I run and tumble through the opening into the weeds. I stand. The sky is grey. I limp to the canoe, parked at the rickety dock. I jump in, lift the paddle, and drift alone upstream. After a minute, I look behind me. The Second Church of Baphomet is engulfed in flames. The girl in the sun dress shrieks as she runs through the burning garden, her head on fire. The peacock's fanned feathers burn, too, as the bird toddles about screeching. Then the bird drops and burns and the church becomes a huge pile of simmering ashes.

"I will get by."

~The Grateful Dead, 'Touch of Grey,' from the album *In the Dark* (1987)

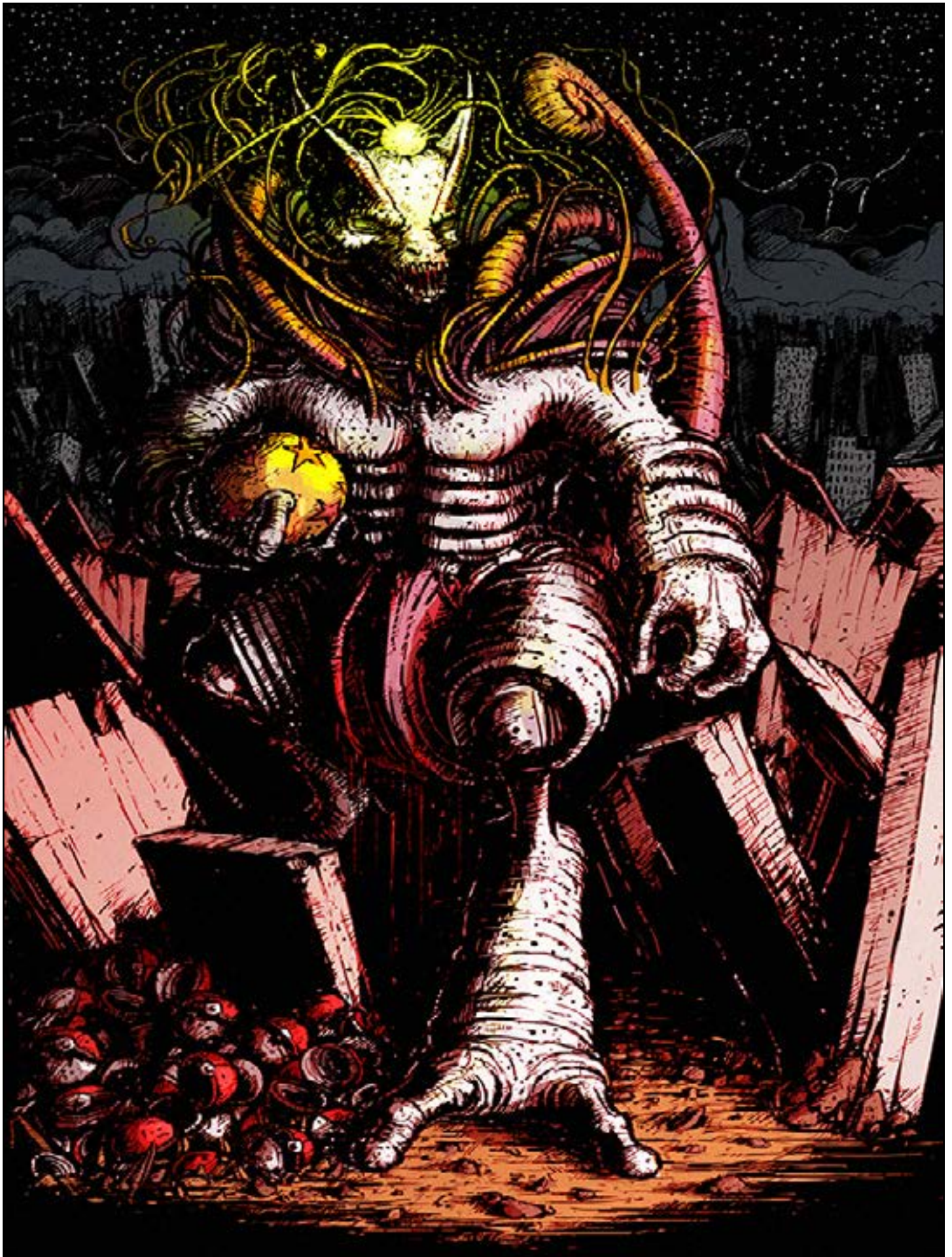
A sudden wind whips the ashes off the ground into a spinning swirl that settles to form a colossal bird made of ashes. Half its body is charred black, the other side is smoked white. Its piercing, phoenix eye stares down on me.

I turn away from the bird and start paddling my ass off. I hear its large wings flapping...taking off...and then I feel a breeze on my back that becomes increasingly more palpable. The bird clutches my shoulders in its enormous talons, penetrating my flesh, and lifts me from the canoe. It carries me upstream, over the point of the 'v' lined treetops where the sun is rising. It flies me over the rising sun made of paper mache with obelisk rays wrapped in Christmas lights, carrying me into the grey construction paper that has sparse clumps of cotton pasted to it.









# Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things

## By Thomas Kearnes

The sudden noises echoed through the house, disturbing Maxine as she unpacked. The move hadn't gone like she and Walter had hoped—amoral furniture movers, two missing boxes, broken dishes. Maxine's heart skipped to hear Persephone giggle upstairs and then the whirl of wheels atop a wooden floor; her daughter had found her skates. Maxine wanted to shout at the ceiling—not indoors, we had a deal!—but she knew Walter would never back her up. She could hear him: *Let the kid have fun.* She could feel his hand upon her hip. *After all that's happened, we need to embrace the light.*

Walter had adopted these noxious platitudes shortly after Athena's death six months ago. *Heaven has a new angel*, he'd said; Maxine had wept. *God brought this burden because we're strong*, he'd said; Maxine had wept louder. *Everything happens for a reason*, he'd said; Maxine wished she, too, had died inside that incubator, gloved fingers caressing Athena's frail form, Maxine taking a sharp breath before placing them over her infant daughter's chest. Athena's heartbeat was as quick and elusive as a pinprick.

Collecting the shards of a ceramic dinner plate, Maxine looked up to see Persephone in the doorway. The girl dug her foot into the hallway carpet, a bull eager for its dance with the matador. The skate's back wheels spun uselessly. "I'm bored. Everyone is old and stupid."

"It's only been two days," Maxine said.

"I can't text Aimee."

"You're too young to text."

"Can we have pepperoni pizza?"

"We're not getting pizza again." Maxine shrugged and tossed ceramic shards into the trash can. "No skates in the house, sweetie. We had a deal."

Persephone refused to obey, and Maxine refused to push the point. When her daughter asked to explore the block, Maxine nodded absently then started on another box. Persephone started first grade in two weeks, and Maxine seized any opportunity to distract the girl.

*She's too young to be out alone*, Walter would say. *It's horrible enough to lose one child.* Maxine would reply as she always did: *Darling, I'm so tired.*

Twenty minutes passed, but Persephone didn't return. Maxine, however, didn't notice, busy lining the

wall over the stairs with family photos. Of course, the only images of Athena were taken from outside her incubator. In one, her rubber doll-head turned toward the lens, black eyes empty and uncomprehending, and in another, her rubber doll-fingers reached nowhere, unaware there was nothing to grab. Maxine brooded over her two daughters' similarities: the puckered mouth, goldfish eyes, bowtie ears. Persephone, too young, hadn't been allowed in the hospitals' nursery. Maxine and Walter secretly agreed with the staff's decision.

Maxine felt lacking in some essential way. She'd failed to tether Athena to the earth, and now she entertained horrid daydreams: a terror-minded teen storming Persephone's classroom; a twister sucking Persephone from beneath a mattress slapped over the bathtub; a child pornographer stealing her from sleep. The girl's bedroom overlooked the neighborhood that Maxine and Walter had selected with a surgeon's precision. Still, dangers festered in other lawns, behind others' fences—dangers Maxine found so patent, her only means of coping was to swiftly deny their reality.

*Why can't I see Athena*, the girl had asked Maxine the day before Athena fell silent among the feckless beeps and mechanical sighs. *You promised*.

The land line's ring was foreign to Maxine—she didn't at first understand its meaning. It was Walter. They spoke in familiar, clipped phrases as if they were the leads in a screwball farce.

"Darling," Maxine asked, "Persephone needs you here in the house."

"How will I pay this house if I don't work?"

"She's upstairs sulking as we speak." The lie came easily to Maxine. Her skin pricked while she waited for him to take the bait. Her disappointment upon hearing his reply again pricked her skin, more sharply this time.

"It's a great neighborhood," he said. "Tell her to make some friends."

"We haven't been here long enough."

"This is a fresh start in a fresh place, honey. Let's stay positive."

Maxine felt alone in their large, unfriendly home with its cherry-paneled walls and dark-hued ceilings that loomed like thunderclouds. For a moment, she remembered Athena's hand inside hers, her gloved hand. Actually, she'd been able to grip her infant daughter's entire arm. She'd felt the tiny being's heartbeat, too fast and too quiet. A car horn's bleat shattered her reverie. She glanced at her watch. Persephone had been gone a half-hour.

Maxine began her search. Peaceful Acres was the sort of fabricated neighborhood Maxine had ridiculed as a girl. She didn't resent the slight decline in economic status her move here signified; at least, she didn't *openly* resent it. The rows of dull and identical two-story homes hypnotized her. She spotted a group of children huddled in a knot, as if debating the next play in football. Above their heads, the end of a hockey stick bobbed in and out



of view. Where had they come from? Though she'd dismissed Persephone's complaint about no children, she secretly agreed with the observation. Lavender Avenue seemed anemic in the kid department. Maxine did not trust large groups of children. She quickened her pace.

As she hurried, some children urged the others to disperse. They were dressed smartly, clean with expensive haircuts. As the crowd thinned, Maxine exhaled with relief to spot Persephone among the makeshift mob. The girl poked at something with the hockey stick. Maxine's relief evaporated, however, to discover what her daughter found so compelling.

The cat was dead, dead and fat. Its belly swelled like a full moon, blackened from the road's grease and dirt. Its right eye had popped from its socket and dangled onto the creature's angular, prescient face. Blood had dried into a dark burgundy pool though Maxine didn't notice any wound. The animal seemed ready to explode, an overinflated balloon, but Persephone kept stabbing it. Maxine worried it might rupture like a piñata, the remaining children snatching the innards as if they were Easter eggs.

"What on earth are you doing, sweetie?"

"Mommy, make it live again!"

Maxine stared at her daughter, oblivious to the departing children. The cat's remaining gazed at the woman, accusing her. She grabbed Persephone's wrist. The hockey stick clattered to the asphalt. They began across the street. Persephone resisted, but her skates betrayed her, all too eager to roll.

"What have I told you about that?"

"I didn't touch it."

"Don't get sassy."

Persephone glanced over her shoulder. "He needs a doctor, Mommy."

"A doctor can't help him now."

"But Mommy—"

The green minivan zipped past, missing Maxine and her daughter by inches. The driver swore at them and mashed his horn. Maxine fell to her knees, clutching the girl. Terror bubbled behind her eyes, the reality of what had happened (or what *almost* had happened) detonating like a cloudburst. Her skin turned moist, her heartbeat thudded. You can lose all you love in a moment, she thought. That's all the time God needs.

"You didn't look before crossing the street," Persephone said.

Her innocence stunned Maxine, rearranged her molecules. She laughed and finally released the girl. "No, sweetie," she said, "I didn't. Shame on me."

Maxine watched the girl skate toward their new home. She was small for her age, not quite delicate but certainly not robust. She feared Persephone would be too preoccupied with her own thoughts to put up a defense if faced with danger. She was like a magnificent butterfly bobbing on the breeze toward the grill of an eighteen-wheeler. Still, Maxine would never admit *both* her children couldn't thrive in the world.

She hoped that would be the end of Persephone's preoccupation with death. As Maxine settled into the house she'd begun to resent, she shuddered to find Persephone vegetating before Headline News, enraptured by the latest natural disaster or atrocity in the Middle East. She watched her daughter stand on the stairs, gazing at the photos of dead Athena. Walter dismissed her fascination as normal, hardly worth mentioning. "We should be thankful it isn't sex," he told her, hand on her hip. Maxine was not mollified. He recommended they send Persephone to the city to visit her best friend, Aimee. "She makes our little girl so happy", he said. "Don't you want her to be happy?" Maxine sighed and flopped onto the bed. Walter's eyes lit up, amorous, but Maxine's hard glare doused his desire instantly.

"That Aimee kid is a juvenile delinquent," she said.

"Nonsense," Walter said. "She's just a bit of a daredevil."

"She set off the burglar alarm in our old condo."

Walter rolled his eyes, dismissed her.

"On purpose," she added.

He sat next to her. "It would get her out of your hair," he said. "Just for the weekend." He lightly grazed her shoulders. As his fingers increased their pressure, she recalled with a stabbing pain how she hungered for a touch that did not end in death.

"I'll think about it."

Late that night, hours after Walter sang to Persephone about a little teapot, short and stout, and Maxine looked on from the doorway, she jerked awake, startled to hear the front door close. She considered waking Walter, but couldn't bear more of his condescending "attention." Instead, she quietly headed downstairs. In the kitchen, she thought about grabbing a knife. Finally, she left the house unarmed. This was a safe neighborhood, she told herself. Persephone's boredom with it was as good an indication as any.

Lavender Avenue was abandoned. As Maxine reached the curb, she realized she'd failed to check Persephone's room. Walter would be incensed to learn that, she thought. Of course, this oversight was easily explained: Persephone had been the one at the door. Maxine had known it the moment she woke. The girl lurked somewhere in the still neighborhood.



After passing one dark house after another, too timid to step upon any lawns, much less peer into any backyards, Maxine saw a child-sized figure in the shadows between two streetlamps. As she approached, she recognized Persephone's nightgown and wild curly hair. This was the same spot where Persephone had disgraced the dead cat. The girl didn't look up at Maxine, but instead continued gazing at a dark stain by the curb. She didn't acknowledge her mother until Maxine's silhouette mingled with her own.

"What happened to him, Mommy?"

Maxine knew what she meant. "I don't understand, sweetie."

"Did it get up and leave? Is it better?"

Relief inflated Maxine like oxygen gulped by a drowning man. "No, sweetie, God took him to Heaven." She didn't really believe in an afterlife, a secret she'd hidden from Walter their entire marriage, and she was tempted to make a crack about Anima Control's slow response. She knew, however, a good mother would offer Persephone her hand and guide her back toward the house—no tears, no accusations, no anger—so that's what she did. Maxine called Aimee's mother the next morning. She insisted the girls spend the weekend in her daughter's new neighborhood.

She had rules for the girls. Failure to heed them would result in no dinner at Chuck E. Cheese and no new Pixar film. Of course, work took Walter away for the weekend. The upside, Maxine thought, was that Persephone would credit her and not Walter for this indulgence. After six hours of cackling and chattering while a storm threatened, however, Maxine made no resistance when the clouds cleared and Aimee demanded they go outside. Persephone slapped on her skates and followed her friend outside.

While the white noise of the house—the hums of the refrigerator, central air conditioning, and clothes dryer—soothed Maxine, she didn't truly relax until a glass of red wine. Walter had insisted they share it on a special occasion, but she doubted he'd notice. She didn't think about Persephone or Aimee, she didn't think about Athena. Instead, Maxine thought about the house, how to manipulate its domineering persona into something warmer. First, she'd repaint the ghastly ceilings. She wondered if the Addams Family had lived there before her. Her home improvement fantasies bewitched her until she heard the screech of tires and screams of children erupting directly across the street.

As if in a fugue, Maxine slowly rose to her feet. She calmly passed through the door into the neighborhood. She should call the homeowner's association about all this reckless driving, she thought. Her refusal to panic centered about her faith that bad fortune would befall Aimee before her daughter. Aimee was reckless, insolent and rebellious; Persephone was merely curious about morbid things. Even the end of the hockey stick bouncing

over the heads of another group of children didn't inflate her fear.

The kids dispersed as Maxine approached, and she was about to admonish her daughter before she realized that it was actually Aimee poking away at something on the asphalt. The girl's head whipped up at the sound of her voice. She dropped the stick and fled down the road, screaming and crying.

Persephone's body lay on the asphalt, her limbs jumbled like those of a sock monkey. At least one was broken, likely more. Bright red blood pooled beneath her head, the fluid oozing toward the curb. Her face was blank, as if she expected the sky to open and admit her. Still in shock, Maxine knelt to check her daughter's breathing—there was none. Please, God, she thought, not my other daughter. Not unless I can go with her.

As Maxine choked out silent tears, however, Persephone blinked. Maxine recalled Dorothy's face as her relatives rejoiced over her return from Oz. "Mommy," the girl cried, forcing Maxine's hand over her tiny chest, the joyful muscle now pounding inside. "I'm not dead anymore!"

# Confessions of a Freemason: An Exposé By E.S. Wynn

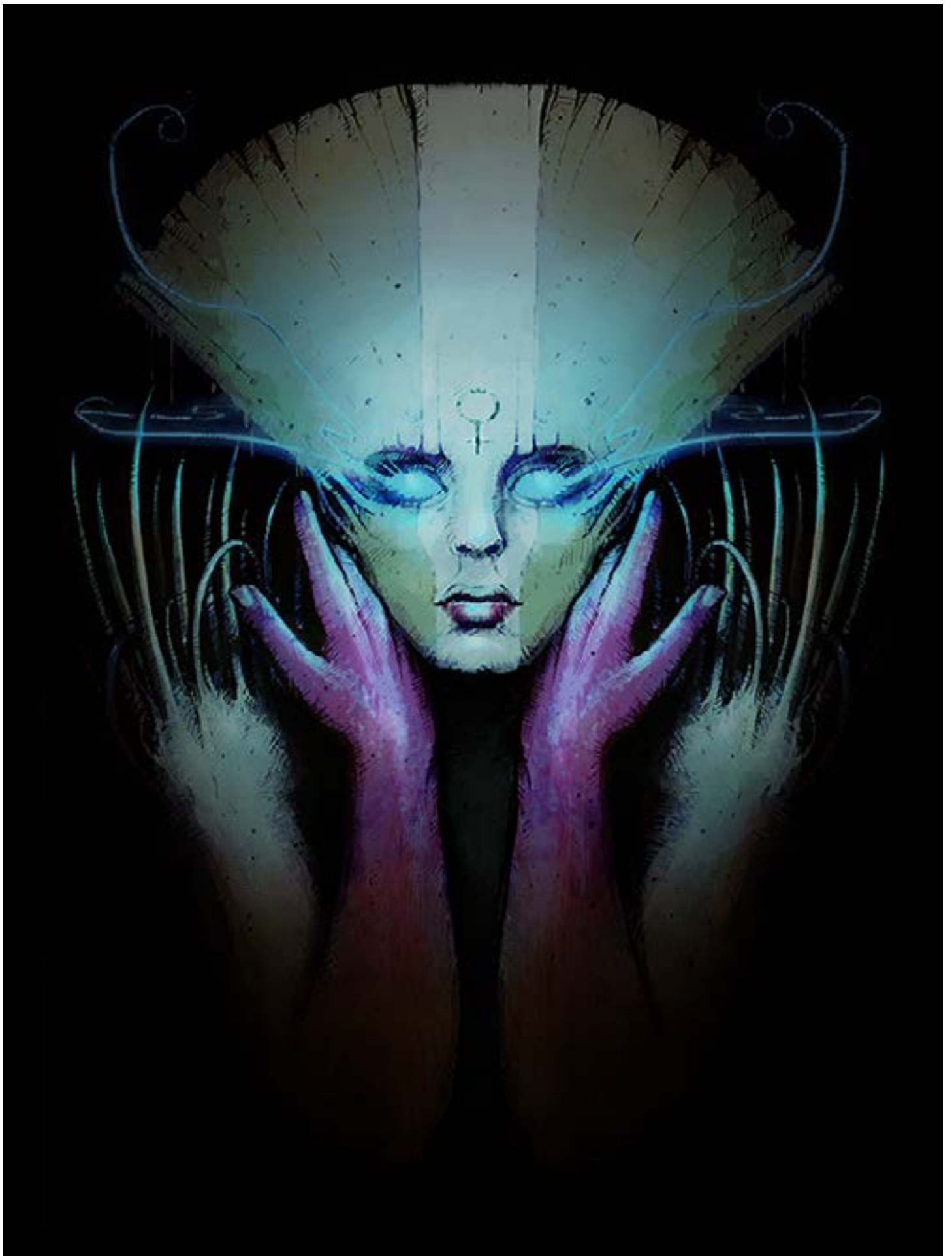
My name is E.S. Wynn. I am the author of fifty-one books and a proud Freemason.

Wait, *what*?

I love the reactions I get when I tell people that I am a proud Freemason. I love the looks, the assumptions, the accusations, the way some people go from friendly kindness to violent, frothing anger in the time it takes for my affiliation to sink into their minds. I love the way my proud admission sometimes brings smiles to the faces of people who are complete strangers one moment, reveals them as friendly, kind brothers, or the kind kin of Masons in the next moment. I love being a Freemason, and I love all of the little things that people think about Freemasonry, whether those things are true and grounded in fact or are rather little more than persistent slander fueled by ancient and long disproven hoaxes.

I am a proud Freemason. I attend most of my lodge's functions, from stated meetings (similar to a business meeting-- we discuss things like how to allocate lodge funds, the acceptance of new brothers, etc.) to Initiations, Passings and Raisings. As a Master Mason (3rd degree) I am allowed to attend any and all meetings at my lodge (aka my Blue Lodge) and any other Blue Lodge that would greet me as a friend, but I do miss a few meetings here and there because of prior engagements, family duties, etc. Despite what you have probably heard, the highest degree offered in Freemasonry is, in fact, the third degree, or Master Mason degree. Scottish Rite offers degrees all the way up to 33rd, but these degrees aren't considered to be above the Blue Lodge's third degree. They're part of the "mysteries" of the Scottish Rite, one of many of the appendant bodies of Freemasonry. (Other bodies include groups like the Shriners, the York Rite, and the Swedish Rite.) These "mysteries" contain wisdom interpreted from the bible and communicated in allegorical performances similar to Sunday school plays. As a Mason, I can't tell you much more than that, but I can assure you that all of our "rituals" are really that tame.

Speaking of what I can and cannot tell, I (and many other Masons) have often been asked how far we can be trusted (in regards to what we say about what goes on behind closed doors in the lodge) if we are sworn to secrecy. I always answer this question in two ways-- yes, we are sworn to secrecy. We take an oath that we will keep secret the topics that are discussed in the lodge, but we are also sworn to be honest and "on the level" in our lives both inside and outside the lodge. No Mason will ever lie to you about what goes on behind the closed doors of a lodge meeting, but they won't tell you everything in intimate detail, either. (That's okay, because there have been a ton of books published, some of them freely available online, that do go into every intimate detail, if you really want to read up on how Initiations, Passings, Raisings, etc. are done in Freemasonry.) The other answer I always give is this-- Masonry may be "secretive" in certain ways. Yes, we do have secret handshakes, secret signs, etc. that we use to recognize other brothers, but so do most frat houses. Our lodge meetings aren't secret (we advertise them openly) but they are private, members-only meetings, (usually held after a dinner open to wives, family, friends, etc.) and are no more nefarious than any closed-door board meeting for a non-profit organization or the shareholders of a company. The only thing we "plot" behind closed doors are the details of our lodge's maintenance budget and who is going to cook dinner next month. Honestly, you'd find more dirt at the closed meetings of a motorcycle club or a volunteer fire department than you would at a Masonic Lodge meeting.



All that being said, let's delve into some of the most persistent myths and accusations I've seen leveled at Freemasonry during my time with the brotherhood.

Perhaps the biggest, most nefarious charge I've seen leveled at Freemasons is the accusation that we are a bunch of satan-worshippers who sacrifice babies, drink blood from skulls, etc. People have asked me questions like "but don't Masons have sex with goats and worship goat-headed idols?" to which I always reply with an emphatic **NO**. Now, you may hear Masons tease one another about "the goat" and there are even references toted out by conspiracy theorists that talk about how Masons "ride goats" during our meetings, but in all honesty, there has never been a goat (living, dead, stuffed or mechanical) anywhere near my Lodge. So where does this nonsense about goats come from?

Well, one of the things that tends to get Masonry in trouble with uber-religious types more often than not is the fact that we recognize all religions as being valid-- not just one, and certainly not just one faction of Christianity. Many have used that fact alone to decry us as "satanists." Our main criteria for joining is that candidates must have some belief in some kind of higher power-- whatever it may be. It doesn't matter if you're a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian or if you're into Shinto-- as long as you believe that there's *something more*, you're good with us. Heck, we'll even let you swear your oath on the sacred book of your choice. (Don't be alarmed, the oath is essentially "Here are all the ways I swear I won't tell anyone about what happens at our business meetings, as in, "I won't write it, speak it, etch it, etc.") Personally, that kind of openness and acceptance of other faiths is one of the things that drew me to Masonry-- but for those who take the whole "my God is better than your God" thing really seriously, it's seen as an evil idea and a straight ticket to hell.

So where does the goat come into all of this? Well, if you're going to be tolerant and accepting of all of your diverse members' spiritual beliefs, you have to have a way of referring to "the divine" without offending anyone. In Masonry, (and in keeping with Masonic symbolism,) we use a placeholder term: "Great Architect Of The Universe" or G.A.O.T.U. to pay respect to the many and varied faiths of our brothers. This is an old placeholder, but it isn't the original placeholder. In the earliest Masonic ritual books (sounds ominous, but the books basically just tell brothers where to stand, how to open business meetings, etc.) the placeholder that was used was "God Of All Things" or GOAT. As you can imagine, that term was quick to change the instant people started assuming Masons have a thing for goats (and goat-headed demons.)

Which is where we get into the accusations about Masons worshipping a goat-headed demon called Baphomet.

If you've never heard of Baphomet, let me give you a quick run down on the thing. A quick web search will reveal a picture of a satanic, horrible-looking goat-headed guy and a summary somewhere along the lines of "the Knights Templar worship satan in the form of this goat-demon." Wow. Sometimes, when there's six centuries of history involved, it really can be a bit like playing *telephone*.

Accusations of Baphomet worship do go back to the days of the original Knights Templar, the crusades and the inquisition, but many different scholars have many different explanations for why inquisition records say that the Knights Templar were so darn evil. The most reasonable explanation seems to be that they got very rich with all their looting and pillaging in the Islamic East and the inquisition-era church found their power to be rather intimidating. Add to that the fact that all the time spent in the middle east began to lead to religious syncretism between Muslims and Christians post-crusade, and you have the makings of some very real accusations against the Knights Templar. While admissions to worshipping demons certainly came out under duress (the inquisition-era torture tactics were brutal beyond belief, and many people would admit to anything just to be killed so the pain would end) worshipping of Baphomet was another matter entirely. Apparently, Baphomet wasn't actually originally a demon at all, only characterized that way much later (thanks to a



19<sup>th</sup> century occultist with an interest in dark magic named Eliphas Lévi.) Baphomet was, instead, a French mispronunciation of “Mahomet” or “Muhammed.” So, essentially, the Knights Templar never worshipped a demon called Baphomet, but some of them, after spending a long time in the Middle East, probably turned to Islam or incorporated Islamic beliefs into their lives. *That’s it.*

So how does all of this figure into Freemasonry?

Well, the Knights Templar were a pretty interesting bunch of folks however you want to look at them, and people on both sides of the fence (those who are convinced that Masons are satanists and those who know for a fact that we are not) have tried to find links between the founding of Freemasonry and the collapse of the Knights Templar, some of them with interesting results. Many books have been written on how the two might be connected, and every Mason has a different viewpoint on the matter, but I can assure you that our lodges aren’t full of “Templar gold,” though I can see how the fact that Freemasons donate literally millions of dollars to education and other philanthropic causes every year might make outsiders assume that we’re all sitting on our own pile of gold bars.

But all this talk of demon worship must be going somewhere really interesting, right? I’m sure there are some astute readers out there who are clinging to that last shred of hope in their anti-masonic arsenal-- Albert Pike and his “Luciferian Doctrine.”

For those who don’t know the name, Albert Pike is probably one of the most iconic Freemasons and was a big muckity-muck in the Scottish Rite who wrote a lot of books. He is quoted regularly by Masons and non-Masons alike, but one quote gets dragged out more often than any others:

*“To you, Sovereign Grand Inspectors General, we say this, that you may repeat it to the Brethren of the 32<sup>nd</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> degrees-The Masonic religion should be, by all of its initiates of the higher degrees, maintained in the purity of the Luciferian doctrine. If Lucifer were not God, would Adonay (the God of the Christians) whose deeds prove his cruelty perfidy, and hatred of man, Barbarism and repulsion for science, would Adonay and his priests calumniate him? Thus, the doctrine of Satanism is heresy; and the true and pure philosophic religion is the belief in Lucifer, the equal of Adonay: but Lucifer, God of Light and God of Good is struggling for humanity against Adonay, the God of Darkness and Evil.”*

The problem is that Pike didn’t write those words. Oh sure, they’re from a book with his name on it, but the book was actually written years after Albert Pike’s death by anti-mason Leo Taxil (AKA Gabriel Antoine Jogand-Page) a man who even actually publicly admitted to the hoax in 1897. In addition to that, any Mason who reads the quote could easily tell you that it doesn’t match Pike’s writing style, and that it contains a number of factual errors no Mason would make. One of them is the idea of a “Masonic religion.”

As you have probably gathered already, Freemasonry is not a religion-- there are elements that might make it seem like that from the outside (using the term Great Architect of the Universe instead of “God,” “Allah,” etc., calling our lodges “Temples,”) but in reality, Freemasonry is only a fraternal organization where men can be completely themselves, can embrace and feel in touch with their own personal spirituality, whatever form that may take, without being subjected to the ostracizing elements of religious dogma. Freemasons welcome all religions, and no brother is ever asked to change or give up his spiritual beliefs. Our rituals and Temples only allow us to be spiritual together in a way that is completely tolerant and accepting of the beliefs of those around us.

There are plenty of other myths about “satanic” or “demonic” things Freemasons do behind closed doors-- enough to fill (at least) an entire book, I’m certain, so I won’t try to list all of them here. No, we don’t swear on satanic bibles, but yes, we are given commemorative “Masonic Bibles” on the night of our Raising

(the achieving of our Third or Master Mason degree.) These bibles are usually just the KJV version with a glossary of Masonic terms and symbols in the back, and they're easy enough to find and buy online. If a brother isn't Christian, he will usually be given a commemorative version of the text that he holds most sacred, whether that be the Hebrew Tanach, the Muslim Koran, the Hindu Veda, etc.

Contrary to popular belief, we don't drink wine from a skull to become Freemasons, we don't drink blood, sacrifice virgins to dark elder gods, or meet only on the full moon (though we do generally meet after work, which means in the evening/night.) There are daylight lodges, but they're few and the membership is usually made up of retirees who can't drive at night. We aren't "a tiny elite" and the Illuminati are nothing but an extinct organization that was originally made up of a group of guys who left Freemasonry (and who haven't had any impact on world politics since 1785.) There are almost two million Masons in America at this time, though our numbers have declined (along with almost every other fraternal organization's numbers) since the 1950's, when over four million American men were Masons. We aren't a "rich white guy club," and don't discriminate based on skin color or any other physical or social trait. We aren't "anti-gay" and we aren't "secretly gay" either. Yes, there are lodges that have been shut down (by their grand lodges) for racist or homophobic practices, but such unmasonic Blue Lodges are few and far between. Yes, Joseph Smith may have been a Mason (there's lots of interesting evidence that seems to indicate it) but not all Masons are Mormons. Our lodges aren't cover for missile silos or doomsday bunkers, and we aren't all on the same page politically (there are Democrat Masons, Republican Masons, Green Party Masons, etc.) We don't kill our own members for "giving up the secrets" and we don't kidnap anyone. We aren't a gang extorting protection money from local businesses and we don't even draw public funds. Masonic memberships are not tax deductible and wearing the square and compass won't get you out of a traffic ticket or get you a free pass if you're caught committing a crime. (In fact, Masons who commit felonious acts are likely to be brought up on Masonic charges as well, and may even be banned from participating in Freemasonry!) Yes, there is an old, old federal law that says that you can be arrested for wearing certain symbols without being a member of the organization they belong to, but it doesn't just apply to Freemasonry and, in fact, falls under the whole "anti-impersonation" legislation that protects officers, club members, doctors and the employees of businesses from being given a bad name because someone wearing their icon is running around making trouble.

And then, we come to the big one. The NWO, the "plan for man" and the presence of "Masonic" symbolism on US currency. First, let's address the myth that the "*All Seeing Eye on top of the unfinished pyramid*" design on the \$1 bill is related to Freemasonry. In reality the bill was initially designed by a committee of four men, only one of whom was a Freemason (Benjamin Franklin) and it wasn't even his idea-- it was brought forth instead by artist Pierre du Simitiere, who had no ties or interest in Freemasonry (as far as we know.) So why the eye and pyramid? Throughout the Renaissance period, the "all seeing eye" was used as a non-denominational representation of God. The pyramid, with its thirteen steps (one for each of the original colonies) was selected because it was hoped that the United States would stand strong forever, just as the Great Pyramids still do today.

As for Freemasons ruling the world-- sometimes it's all we can do to organize a barbeque or a lodge clean-up day. Most Freemasons are hard working, middle class men. We don't have the time or energy to try to pull hidden strings behind the government, and in fact, we are actually forbidden by charter to talk politics in lodge. So, if we're not plotting the demise and/or control of the world behind closed doors and we have over a million members-- how could we possibly keep our "evil plans" so secret? Hardcore conspiracy theorists might not believe it, but Freemasonry actually reminds us of our duties to our country (whatever country a given Mason is a citizen of) and in the few cases on record where men have used Masonry to further their political goals or aims, all men involved were brought up on Masonic charges and banned from the fraternity the moment their activities came to light!

Another point that's often brought up is why so many prominent individuals have been Freemasons. If

we weren't trying to rule the world, then why were men like F.D.R., George Washington, Winston Churchill, Mozart, Voltaire, Buzz Aldrin, Sir Thomas Lipton and so many Kings, Presidents and Vice-presidents all aligned with the fraternity? You may not believe it, but all of the evidence points to the fact that they were members because-- it's just that great of an organization! What does it say about the fraternity when so many great men have sought membership? Not that the fraternity made them great (heck, I wrote forty-three of my fifty-one books before I even joined) but rather that these great men chose Masonry because something about it, something about the brotherhood and fellowship of men who were all striving to make themselves into better, smarter, more spiritual and more talented men spoke to them. In history, there have been more men of political power and influence who were not Masons than there have been who were, but I have never met a Mason who wasn't a great man, not in political clout or power, but where it really counts-- in his character.

But don't take my word for it-- get out there and check out Freemasonry for yourself. <http://www.freemason.org/>



# Walt Disney's Head

## By Daniel W. Gonzales

Deep below the labyrinthine vaults of Sleeping Beauty's castle and the room of robot Aladdins lays Walt Disney's head. Preserved in a jar with formaldehyde, pickled vinegar and a mysterious substance developed by the KGB in 1952 and captured by J. Edgar Hoover during the Commie Panic. They say it is the same substance that Lucille Ball used to preserve Desi Arnaz' cock in a jar which she kept in her desk and was sold to Disney the year Marilyn died and used to save the crispy corpse of James Dean so it could be mass produced during the clone craze of 2042. Above ground the walls tremble as the stomping sounds rumble above of dancing zebras, holographic penguins and men on stilts all dancing to a generic melody composed by syphilic monkeys pounding away on pianos while injected with Einstein's DNA.

"Celebrate! Come on celebrate our 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary!" the animatronic duck sings as a child holds up a marmalade balloon with a placental filling. It oozes raspberry cream and he puts it to his lips.

"Save room for your Morpho Dog!" his mother says. She has a baby strapped to her chest, one on her back, two cloned ferrets on her sides and a baby in her belly. In a carriage she rolls down the sparkingly yellow street, she has a self-cleaning diaper bag and five vials of Valium. A sneering mouse with a wolf-like face sneers and growls as it walks by the children making them scream. In the Halls of Mickey, the boy Joshie of the mechanical arm notes that Mickey used to look nice but has morphed into this creepy creature that resembles a rabid wolverine now. Apparently this was what children liked in a survey done by Masters & Johnson.

An animatronic A.I. named Broomhilde walks by in full Salem Witch garb.

"Look there's Broomy!" Joshie's mother says, "Your favorite witch!"

Roasting Witches was Joshie's favorite Disney holo-flick about the Salem Witch trials. It was based on a true story about a witch who falls in love with Puritan who saves her from the stake and they sing, "My Heart Burns for You (the paranoia mix)" which was last years #1 radio Disney hit.

A walking info bot educated them as it walked by: "Roasting witches is based on the Salem Witch trials in which a small misunderstanding led a few young girls to be burned at the stake but they were later brought back to life by a wizard named Spiro who punished the Puritans for their religious ignorance."

Just then a cartoon Hitler walked by with a group of people dressed as holocaust victims from the musical, "Nazis: a Love Story" which was all about Hitler's love affair with a Jewish Princess. The info machine informed them that it was loosely based on a true story but it had been so long since that war that no one really cared what was true or not anyway.

"When is the firework show, Momma?" Joshie said.

"Tonight, darling, when the dome goes dark and Tinkerbell flies over the magic castle."

The artificial sunlight and heat generators beat down on them and made her sweat.

"You would think they could produce a little more fake wind in this place," she said.

The baby on her back cried.

She spoke to the diaper bag, "Tube 6, Tristan feeding."

An IV pumped food into the child's belly and she tossed Joshie's blue-red hair.

"Do you want to go on the Red Blood Cells ride?" she asked him.

"OH YEAH!"

They used their Presidential Pass but 167 other people bought the same pass so they still had to wait three hours in line. Floating monitors played Disney films from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century while they waited.

"These Pixar films are so old," Joshie said, "They are stupid looking, how could people watch that?"

"Back then, these were good special effects," his mother said, "Growing up we still had a physical television."

"What do you mean?" Joshie asked.





"We had to watch things on a TV screen."

"Weird," he said, "I mean, wasn't it weird? How was that exciting? I mean, if you couldn't actually be a character in the movie. That just seems really boring."

"We made do."

Once they finally made it inside they were strapped in by androids that had cartoon animal heads and a holo-disk was plugged into the back of their brainstem.

Joshie felt himself transform and listened to the narrator's voice all around him like the voice of God as he swam through the blood stream.

Donald Duck's face appeared on a diseased liver.

"Samantha has cancer and is getting radiation treatments," the narrator said.

Joshie felt his body race as he was propelled down the bloodstream screaming. He saw his mother next to him. Her face was inside a cell and she smiled at him as they slid down past a virtual vein. It was said that there were fifty hidden Mickeys in this ride, he saw three of them float by and spotted another on the pancreas.

"The cancer is slowing eating away at Samantha's body, she hasn't had her disease shots yet because she is a victim of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and plagued by illness. Watch as the healthy and diseased cells both die."

Joshie screamed as cells exploded around him.

A young girl's face inside the nexus of a white blood cell screamed next to him.

They fell down into the stomach and then into the small intestine of their virtual host.

Cancerina the Tumor Queen blocked their passageway.

"I WILL DESTROY YOU AND ROT YOUR HEALTHY BODY AWAY INTO NOTHINGNESS!" she screamed.

She spit black poison at them.

Joshie saw another hidden Mickey image.

There were a few more fireworks and special effects but before he knew it, they were sliding into the anus and then ejected from the ride. The disc snapped out of his neck.

"Thank you for riding with us today and have a Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious day!" a blonde woman said.

He recognized her as Alice from Alice of Wonderland.

She had all white pupils and a forked tongue.

They spent the afternoon at Planet Earth café.

"Can we get two American Burgers with Canadian Fries and two African Shakes?"

"Do you want a German cheese stick with that?" the waitress asked.

"No thanks," Joshie's mother said, "But I will take two suckling vials for the little ones."

The waitress smiled at them, she was one of the few humans who actually worked here. She had a beehive hairdo and a television set up in her hair which played cartoons as she walked. Her nametag read: Persephone, ask me how I can delight you!

On Joshie's menu, he had interesting Earth facts.

"It says Americans used to eat hamburger made from live organisms called cows."

He clicked on the picture. It mooed.

"Weird," he said, "They ate living things that were born that way?"

"They did a lot of weird things, that's why Earth blew up."

"What was it like, Mom?"

"Oh sweetie, I barely remember it. I was only seven when we migrated. Everything was all ugly by then and destroyed. Nothing like you see in the TV or movie shows."

"Was there a Disneyland on Earth?"

"Yes but it was nothing like this. You couldn't live there permanently. It was just a place where people visited once in awhile. They didn't own an entire continent. Although I would like to move to Goofy Acres, Chip N' Dale Creek is getting really violent with all the junkheads and lolligangers."

"Is it true that they are bringing back Walt Disney's head tonight for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary?"

“Yes, sweetie, they froze it before he died and now they can hook it up to a brand new android body and bring him back to life for the first time since he died back in 1966. Can you imagine how surprised he will be to find out that his legacy lived on and moved to another planet? I can’t wait to see his face!”

That night the crowds gathered waving fetal balloons and Corky dolls from the animated feature Vietnam: A Comedy in Errors. Disney was developing their next big project based on Earth’s nuclear holocaust starring Mutie, the half-man, half-porcupine. The magic castle lit up with the skulls of Earth children. Fireworks exploded in the air forming the shapes of constellations while a holographic dragon flew over the crowd. The gates of the castle opened and a pixie woman the color of absinthe flew into the air while A.I. puppets sang.

“It’s a small world, after all...it’s a small world, after all...”

Multi-ethnic faces rejoiced in wide-eyed orgasmic glee. Walt Disney’s head was slowly lowered onto an android body as they slowly poked the electrodes into his brain and brought him back to life.

Joshie grinned, “Is this his first time he will be opening his eyes since he died?”

Joshie’s mother smiled. One of the babies pooped into its diaper. The bag next to her sent a stream of water up to the infant, cleaned the reusable diaper and saved the waste in a container for disposal later.

“To celebrate our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary extravaganza, please join us in welcoming back Walt Disney!” Tinkerbell said through green-blue lips, her eyes were milky white and digital glitter pixelated behind her. Slowly Walt opened his eyes.

He looked out over the crowd of blue and purple haired consumers, fetal balloons, the vicious looking men in mouse costumes, the Liver on a Stick stand, a menagerie of horrifying swirling and gleaming lights lit up over the backdrop of a glimmering dome. In the night sky there were two moons. He began to scream.

# Art Credits

Color designs on pgs. (cover), 8, 16, 30,38,55,64

By <http://renfro666.wix.com/inkenstein-studio>

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Art by Niall Parkinson on pgs. 4,24,37,56,77

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His real interest now lies in pursuing his illustration service DARK AGE DESIGN from which he hopes to work in the realm of areas which incorporate horror and nightmarish themes and concepts such as magazines, book illustration and cover design with perhaps some comic book work.

Niall's work can be seen at the following sites:

w: <http://neonangelus68.wix.com/dark-age-design>

w: [www.artwanted.com/parky68](http://www.artwanted.com/parky68)

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